

Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi
Sunday, June 20, 1971
SESSHIN LECTURE NO. _____
San Francisco

This *sesshin*—we call it "sewing *sesshin*"—*sesshin* and, actually, *rakusu* sewing—*okesa*-sewing *sesshin*. Our *okesa* is not just—just symbol of our teaching, but it is actually dharma itself. But unless you have proper understanding of it, the *rakusu* is something which you wear as a symbol of Buddhist. But that is not proper understanding.

The proper understanding of our *zazen* or *rakusu* is same, not different. Proper understanding of *zazen* is, at the same time, proper understanding of *rakusu*. So unless you have real experience of *zazen*—*zazen* experience, *rakusu* is not actually *rakusu*; it is just something which you wear. It is not dharma itself.

You may think I told you yesterday¹ about *rakusu*—*okesa*, and *okesa* Buddha made—*okesa*. Gathering various material and sewed together and design it in this way after the shape of paddy field. But here² Dōgen-zenji says, refer to the ten—ten names of *okesa*.

By the way, Dōgen-zenji wrote more than 95 fascicles of teaching about transmitted teaching. And two of them is about *okesa*, two of—two fascicles about *okesa*. "Kesa-kudoku" *nomaki* and "Den-e" *nomaki*.³ So you may understand how important *okesa* is for us, you know, and those two fascicles are very long in comparison to other fascicles.

"Kesa-kudoku" means virtue of *okesa*, and "Den-e" *nomaki* means transmitted—about transmitted robe—"Den-e." He refers to ten names of *okesa* or *funzō-e*.⁴ *Funzō-e* means, you know—*fun* is dung or dung. *Fun* [is], you know, something dirty. *Zō* is to "rubbish" or "dust." *E* is robe.

And—one⁵ is *goshaku-e*: robe bitten [chewed on] by cow or animal, you know. And the second is mat- [partial word: "material"?] robe made by

¹ SR-71-06-19 (transcript only; no tape).

² Probably the fascicle "Kesa-kudoku," in Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*.

³ *nomaki*: fascicle.

⁴ Also *nō-e*. Eihei Dōgen: "The usual method of the buddhas ... is to see rags as the best material" ("Kesa-kudoku," *Shōbōgenzō*; G. Nishijima and C. Cross, ed., 1994, Vol. 1, p. 127). From the footnote to that sentence: "'Rags' is ... (FUNZO-E). ... (FUN) means excrement, and ... (SO, pronounced ZO) means 'to sweep' or 'to be swept' [as in *sōji*]. ... (E) means robe or clothes or clothing. ... (FUNZO) represents the Sanskrit *pamsu-kūla*, which means a dust-heap or a collection of rags out of a dust-heap used by Buddhist monks for their robes. ... (FUNZO-E) has been translated either as 'rags' or as 'a robe of rags,' according to the context" (*ibid*).

material—made of material which was bitten [chewed on] by rabbits. And [third is] robe made of burned [material] partly destroyed by fire, you know, like if someone smoke, you know. There may be many holes in the material, so eventually he will throw it—throw it away—that kind of material. [Fourth,] *gassui-e* is material which was thrown away by ladies because of menses, you know. And fifth is child—child bed? [I.e., child birth.] Child bed. What [do you call it]? Child bed. Material—made of the material, you know, tainted by, thrown [away] by—because of the child bed material. Oh. Do you understand [laughs] what I mean? And sixth is material which was, you know, which was—which covered the altar of shrine, you know, some old material which was used in the altar of some various, you know, shrine—shrine of various deities. And seventh is made by material which is thrown away in graveyard. And eighth is material made of material which is offered to god, you know, when someone prayed—pray something for god, then they offer material to god. And [ninth is] some material which a king or—king used. Or [tenth is] material which you pick up on the street. Those are, you know, with those material—those material could be *okesa*.

So usually, you know, the material which usual person thrown away, we pick up and make *okesa*. The point is—so *okesa* is not always could be made by some dirty material, you know. Whether it is dirty or not dirty is not the point. The material which people thrown away could be our *okesa*. This is the point. So Dōgen-zenji says whether it is beautiful embroider[y] or silk or leather, it doesn't matter. Material is—we should not say *okesa* should be made by some dirty material, you know. Whether it is dirty or clean or beautiful or not beautiful is not the point. This point is very important, but, you know, it may be rather difficult to—for you to understand.

From here, from two pages, he talks about this spirit which is rather difficult to explain. You could understand only by practice. Only if you understand what is zazen you will understand this point. You may say your zazen is sometime—your zazen is good and sometime your zazen is not good, you know [laughs]. Sometime your zazen will be sleepy zazen [laughs], drowsy zazen. "Oh, this is not zazen," you may say. You will understand, you know, your zazen in that way, but true zazen, you know, is not, you know—true understanding of zazen cannot be like that. Zazen is not sleepy zazen or drowsy zazen or good zazen. When you, you know, you are free from the idea of good zazen or bad zazen or sleepy zazen, then, you know, you have right understanding of zazen. Anyway, you

⁵ Dōgen's ten types of rags are: "1) rags chewed on by an ox, 2) rags gnawed by rats, 3) rags scorched by fire, 4) rags [soiled by] menstruation, 5) rags [soiled by] childbirth, 6) rags [offered at] a shrine, 7) rags [left at] a graveyard, 8) rags [offered in] petitional prayer, 9) rags [discarded by] a king's officers [*footnote*: suggests uniforms discarded by promoted officers], 10) rags brought back from a funeral" ("*Kesa-kokudo*," *Shōbōgenzō*, Nishijima and Cross, Vol. 1, pp. 145-146; see also "*Den-e*," *ibid.*, p. 163, for a similar list).

must practice zazen. If I say so, you know, it is okay, you know, to sleep in zazen [laughs]. You may understand in that way.

If I—if you say, you know, "Whatever you wear, that is *okesa*." Dōgen-zenji actually say so, you know, in here. He refer to the Third Patriarch of India—India.⁶ His—he was—no one knows whether it is true or not—he was born with—with robe [laughs]. When he was born, he wear, already, *okesa* [laughs, laughter]. Dōgen-zenji said, "What kind of robe is it? Is it," you know, "a silk? Is it leather? [Laughs.] What kind of robe is it?" And his robe is not traditional robe, you know. When—when he, you know—before he became a Third Patriarch in India, it was usual wear it, you know, because he was wearing always. After he joined the order, you know, his robe became robe.

So robe—understanding of robe is something more than you understand. So if you say—if you understand robe [as] just something—some material to wear, it is not perfect understanding. This morning I said you should, you know, be concentrated on every stitch, you know—every stitch—as you are concentrated on your breathing. "Concentration," we say, but that is not actually point. Actual point is—real point is to become one with what you do—to become one with your practice. So anyway, you know, in your practice, you should try to be concentrated on each stitches—on each stitch, and someday you will understand what does it mean. Not immediately [laughs].

I think you are lucky, very lucky, you know, to have robe, you know, like this, which was brought by Bodhidharma from India and which is transmitted from Bodhidharma to the Sixth Patriarch.⁷ And that robe is— is now in Obai-zan—Obai-zan monastery.⁸

And various king [emperors], for an instance, Daiso, King [Emperor] Daiso, at the end of Tang dynasty, sent his messenger to the monastery and asked [for] the robe. And Dōgen-zenji, you know, referred to the letter which was presented by the king [emperor] to that monastery. And he referred to the many various events which happened to those famous monasteries. Not only, you know, we have transmitted robe but also we have, you know, at the same time, we have proper understanding of robe, and based on actual practice of zazen transmitted from Bodhidharma and the Sixth Patriarch.

⁶ Shānavāsin, the third Indian Patriarch.

⁷ Daijan Huineng (Daikan Enō): 638-713. Sixth Chinese Zen Patriarch.

⁸ Mt. Ōbai (Huangmei) is where the Fifth Chinese Patriarch, Daman Hongren (Daiman Kōnin), received transmission and established his monastery. In the "Kesa-kudoku," Dōgen wrote that the robe was deposited in the Pao-lin-ssū (Baolin, Hōrin-ji) temple, built in 504 on Mt. Caoxi (Sokei-zan) of Southern China.

Usually if I say "teaching" or "practice," it could be—it could be one of the many practice, you know. If I say "religion," it could be one of the many religion. But if you really understand what is zazen, it is not so.

Recently I am putting emphasis on this point. What kind of practice we have at Zen Center? This is very important point, not only for us, but also for all the people who are interested in religious practice. If we—if we lose this point, we will end up, you know, sectarians. If you really want to be free from sectarianism, you know, we should know this point. We should have this point. Until, you know, you really accept this point, you should continue our practice. Then, you know, all—all the people who are practicing religious practice will be your good friend, and you can help them a great—a lot, instead of fighting [laughs]. Even though you do not fight with your mouth, you know, your mind is always fighting. No good [laughs]. That is not religion, you know.

Everyone—as every religious people notice—already notice this point, and they know how bad they are [laughs]. Still, they stick to some idea. Some of them, you know, in disguise of non-sectarianism [laughs], still they are developing sectarianism. Even though they say, "We are not sectarian." But actually, they are sectarian from my viewpoint or to my—to me, to my eyes, I know—I can tell [laughing] quite easily whether they are sectarian or not. Although they may say, "Oh, Suzuki-rōshi is terrible sectarian [laughs]. He stick to Sōtō way." Yes, I stick to Sōtō way [laughs], but I am not so bad sectarian as they are [laughs, laughter]. My mind, is, you know, always open, you know. They are my good friend, although I wear Sōtō robe, although I respect Eshun Yoshida-rōshi's⁹ special robe, I am not sectarian. I wish you can understand this point. At least my disciple should understand this point.

And he [Dōgen] refers to, also, various *okesa* like *gojō-e*¹⁰—seven-strip robe, five-strip robe, nine-strip robe. Because, you know, a five-strip robe is for your usual, you know—the robe for when you work, you know. Small one. That is five-strip robe. And seven-strip robe is—you use when you practice zazen with people. That is seven-strip. And nine-strip robe is you use when you officially or formally—when you practice formal practice for some special person, or for your nation, or for your teacher,

⁹ Eshun Yoshida-rōshi: Teacher of *okesa* sewing in the lineage of Hashimoto-rōshi. Abbess Blanche Hartman and others studied with her at San Francisco Zen Center. The "special robe" is probably the Nyoho-e (True Dharma Robe) style of *okesa*. Eko Hashimoto-rōshi (teacher of Katagiri-rōshi) learned the Nyoho-e pattern from Kōdō Sawaki-rōshi. Sawaki-rōshi in turn had studied, at Koki-ji temple, the style of *okesa* sewn by the 18th-century Shingon and Ritsu master Jiyun Sonja. Jiyun Sonja had reconstructed the traditional pattern for the *okesa* from the *Mahavagga* and other Vinaya-pitaka texts. [Source: "Notes on *Okesa* Lineage at Zen Center," an interview with Shohaku Okumura-rōshi, 23 February 1996, recorded by Shōsan Victoria Austin.]

¹⁰ Also *gojō-gesa*. *Gojō-e* is the five-strip robe; *shichijō-e* is the seven-strip robe; and *kūjō-e* is the nine-strip robe.

or when you take service. And there are many more kinds of robes, but strips—nine strips. Up to one hundred is, you know, very formal one.

You know, you should know [the reason] why he refers to this kind—many kinds of robe is [that the] robe should be always with you, you know. He put emphasis to wear or to have robe always with you, you know. It is not some special thing you wear, you know. That is wrong idea. That is something which you have always with you, like the Third Patriarch in India's robe. He was born with robe, so for him it is not possible to take it off [laughs]. His skin is already robe. Those are the most important point when you have—when you want to have proper understanding of *okesa*.

This kind of lecture is maybe too special[ized], so may be difficult for you to understand, I know. If I have some more time, I can answer your question. That would be better—better, I think. If you have question, please ask me, and if you have wrong understanding, I must correct you. *Hai*.

Student A: What is the meaning of the rice paddy? Why—why is the rice paddy mentioned?

Suzuki-rōshi: Rice?

Student A: Rice field related to the *rakusu*. What does that mean?

Suzuki-rōshi: Oh. He, you know—when Buddha was asked to—to make, you know, some robe like uniform for his disciple, by Bimbisāra,¹¹ King Bimbisāra, you know, he was thinking about the loo- [partial word: "look"?] design and he saw paddy field, you know, or—and he thought, "This will be—" you know, "we should design our robe in that way. Big patch and small patch. Big and small. We can use various kinds of material if we design in that way." That is how robe was originated.

But spirit of making robe was not too fair in—ordinal [ordinary?], you know, viewpoint which we human being [are] liable to have. We have many weakness—weak points. Because of that we will create wrong understanding of things: not only robe, but also whatever you see because of our human nature, you know. We create many misunderstanding. So how to be free from that kind of misunderstanding or attachment and to develop human nature properly was his, you know, point. But design was just, you know, made when he saw paddy field.

Student A: What is the meaning of the design on the *maneki*?¹²

¹¹ King of Magadha and lay disciple of Shākyamuni Buddha.

¹² The square patch of fabric, sewn onto the uppermost part of the *rakusu*'s neck strap, upon which the pine stitches are made.

Suzuki-rōshi: Hmm? Yeah?

Student A: Yeah. The design?

Suzuki-rōshi: Oh, that is—I don't think that it—that is just to keep, you know, keep two—two parts tied together. It is pine, you know, pine leaf. That is, you know—in Japan, pine symbolize—pine is—pine tree is—is supposed to be—first of all, it is always green, and pine tree lives long long time, and it doesn't change its color all year round. So we have some special feeling about pine, and that pine leaf we use in various way, you know, that design. When you make some—some *furoshiki*,¹³ you know, we put pine leaves [on them], you know. I think that is why maybe better to ask Yoshida-rōshi [laughs]. He may have some reason—she may have some reason, but I think that is more very common, you know, for Japanese in Japanese culture to use pine leaves. You notice, you know, many—we have many pine-tree design or pine-leaves design. We like bamboo also. Bamboo.

Student B: Where does the *rakusu* ceremony originate?

Suzuki-rōshi: Originate?

Student B: Yeah. How long—how long has the form that we are using now been practiced?

Suzuki-rōshi: At least we, you know, we can find in—maybe in Japan, you know, originated by Dōgen or more older maybe. Every school has this kind of ceremony, you know. Each school. Dōgen-zenji studied, you know, various school, and he had some confidence, you know, in the way he observed those rituals and background of those rituals.

Student C: Rōshi, why do we use new materials?

Suzuki-rōshi: Hmm?

Student C: Why do we buy new material to make robes?

Suzuki-rōshi: That is wrong understanding, you know. He says, in his book, "Sometime you can use new material. Don't be," you know, "caught by new material or old material or beautiful or not beautiful." Okay? New material is okay; silk is okay [laughs].

Student C: Even synthetic?

Suzuki-rōshi: Mmm?

Student C: Even synthetic? [Laughter.]

¹³ Square piece of cloth used for wrapping items such as gifts.

Suzuki-rōshi: Synthetic is okay. That could be his understanding, you know. You—we are liable to, you know, to go [to] one extreme. That is, you know—Dōgen-zenji didn't write. That is, you know, maybe our human nature, you know. We want to rely on something: this extreme or that extreme, you know. If—if you do not care for something beautiful [laughs], you stick to something dirty [laughs] and feel better. If you cannot afford to have gold or a diamond [laughs], you will collect some stone—something. That is human nature. That way we lose our freedom.

So when we see things-as-it-is, you know, then any material can be, you know, can be robe. The color—why, you may then ask, why do we use subdued color? [*Sentence finished; tape turned over.*]

... color is. Or buy new material and cut, you know, without using whole of material is to put emphasis on non-attachment: to destroy or get rid of or to be free from our human tendency which will create problem for us. That point should be, you know, rejected. Human nature is good, but because of one weak point, it doesn't work [laughs], you know. So that point should be, you know, if we can take care of that point in some way, we—any material can be, you know, robe. That is, you know, how you make robe by various material. Do you understand?

So there is some point which you cannot change [laughs], you know. Whether you are Christian or Buddhist, this point cannot be changed [taps on something repeatedly]. If you, you know, change this point, Buddhist cannot be Buddhist, you know. A Christian cannot be good Christian. Everything will be mixed up and destroyed because of—just because of this point, which we call, sometime, "attachment." You see? Do you understand? That is very—that is our enemy, maybe, which does not exist, but we—we create because of idleness. Because we do not work hard enough, we create this problem. Okay? So you can buy material. This is okay.

Student D: Rōshi?

Suzuki-rōshi: *Hai.*

Student D: I'm trying to understand this point sometimes. It seems like what you said was because human beings have a certain nature of attaching to things, that we set up some rules or some forms. For example, when Lisa asked me what should be made out of robe materials. The first thing is that people are kind of—human beings have a funny nature, and they want, you know, there's always attachment to things. So one of the things we do to destroy that kind of attachment is to set up a rule.

Suzuki-rōshi: Set up? Destroy? Not destroy—after destroying, you know, that attachment and set up rule. That is wrong, you see? Big difference, you know. Difference between after destroying attachment to set up rule. You know, if you can only take care of—destroy is wrong, you know, to say—if you say "destroy," is—that is wrong practice, you know. Human nature has some weak point, but we must take care of it. That is what I really mean—not destroy.

But anyway, after taking—taking good care of this point, to set up some rule and, you know, it's wrong, you know. To take care of this weak point we have rules, you know, and if we—if only take care of this point, there is no need to have rules [laughs]. Whatever you wear, you know—your skin—even your skin like Third Patriarch of India. Even your skin could be robe. That much you know, freedom we have.

If you really be a Buddhist, you know, then there is no—not necessary to have rules if you wear robes. But I say until you can forget all about what you are wearing, you know, eventually you will not, you know—you will forget all about what you are wearing, you know. If you come to that point, you know, robe is not, you know, always necessary. You see? It is not—after you become real Buddhist and wear robe. That is wrong [laughs]. And before you become real Buddhist, you should wear robe [laughs]. Before you have—you can take care of yourself, you should follow, you know, you should be incubate—incubate [laughs, laughter]. When you are strong enough, you should be—get out of hospital [?], where there is no rules. I don't know when you can do that [laughs]. Do you understand the point? If you have point, you know, it is okay, you know.

Student D: I still don't understand. It seems as—it seems like you say even though we have a rule, if you really understand yourself and sometimes even though the rule says use old material, you can use either old or new material. Doesn't make any difference, which is fine from the point of view of somebody who understands themselves. But from the point of view of somebody who, you know, is trying to follow the rule, let's say. You know, I mean, when I see a rule that says "okesa should be made of old material," then it seems—of course, you know, any—whatever material I get, I'll take, but it seems that if I were going to actually make it on my own, I'd go out and get old material. Otherwise, it just—I can be very lazy, then, with all the precepts. I could say, "Well, uh, there's the precept that says don't kill, or a precept that says don't speak ill of others," let's say. But I say, "Well, in terms of real understanding, of course I can. It doesn't make any difference." So that—that—that—that intellectual understanding of precepts sometimes is just an excuse for my being lazy, you know, and it's very difficult for me to know when I am having a broad mind, you know, when I'm having a big mind, and when I'm just being lazy.

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah. I—I understand. You are feeling, you know, that something is missing [laughs]. That is, you know, what I want—really what I want to say, you know. You know, I don't want to say—maybe I'm—if I say I will discourage you, so I don't want to say, but if you, you know, really feel in that way, I have to say [laughs]. The point is, you know, in comparison to Buddhist in Japan, you know, you can practice or you can—you can be—you are [in an] easier situation to practice Buddhism. Maybe, you know, we should know this point.

I—I know what kind of difficulty Japanese Buddhist has and what kind of life Zen Center students have, you know. If you compare, you know, Japanese students to Zen Center student, you know, I don't know what to say. It is so different, you know. You may criticize Japanese, you know, young Buddhist. You may criticize them because they do not practice zazen as you do in Zen Center. But maybe Japanese young Buddhist may criticize us, you know, [for] having too easy [a] practice [laughs]. You know, you—you—if you want to—if you want to practice, you can do anything here, you know. You are well supported. You don't have to, you know, worry about anything. And so, you know, maybe for you it is too easy to practice our way.

You say—you said, you know, it is better if we do not try to find old material and make robe. Just buy old [new?] material. But actually it is much more easy to buy something. Under this circumstances, you can also can collect old material. Also it make long, long—it take [laughs] long, long time [but] you can do. But if you must support yourself by working, you know, on the city—in the city, if you are always collecting old materials [laughs] for your robe, you cannot work on the—in the street—in the city. So you lose your income. It is, you know—same thing is true in our management, you know. We—you can sew your *okesa*, but actually when you live—Japan is not any more poor, but [laughs] if you were born in some poor country where you should work all—always that is not possible. You know, it is much better to buy some material at the store. It is hard—it is very hard even to buy new material, but that will be what you can do. In poor country, even though you want to find out some old material, you cannot find, because they use it [laughs]. You see?

Student C: Actually, Rōshi, that—that was—what I meant though was that, like, you just go down to the basement of this building in the laundry room, there is a [one word unclear: "corner"?]—

Suzuki-rōshi: There are a lot!

Student C: —where everybody throws away their clothes.

Suzuki-rōshi: That is—that happens only in America! [Laughs, laughter.]

Student C: But there's—there's enough material down there for about at least five *okesas*. And it wouldn't take very long to put it together.

Suzuki-rōshi: You do it! [Laughs, laughter.] You just do it, you know? When you can do it, you know, when you know how to exactly—after learning, you know, exactly how to do it, you can do it. You see? But to learn it already very difficult, you know. Unless you don't use new material, you know, it is almost impossible how to teach you, you know. When someone—when you teach how to sew *rakusu* some other people—there's maybe paper [pattern] is much better—best, you know, when you take pattern, when you learn how to measure. Old—buy old material, it is not possible.

So in some way, your practice is very luxurious. I feel in that way. You are, you know, children who were born in rich family. Whatever you want to do, you can do it. But that doesn't happen [laughs] in some poor country. American cannot be always rich, you know. It is not fair! [Laughs, laughter.] You—you lose; you do not notice this point. So I am afraid, you know, if you could be a real good Buddhist. I am stuck—I am, you know, I am thinking [about] this point a lot. That is my worry.

So maybe [laughs] that is—that is reason why I couldn't support *okesa* sewing in the practice so much before, you know. It is too luxurious practice. Only in Japan—only [in] Heian Period and people who were born in noble family could do this. They did it before Kamakura Period, but because of that, Buddhists were lost in their practice, because it was too aristocratic practice, you know. Even though you gather old material and spending, you know, a lot of time in each stick—stitch, aft- [partial word: "after"?]—when you make one stitch they bow many times and took up the needle and, you know, sew *okesa* stitch by stitch in that way. That was good practice, they thought, but because of that, Buddhists were lost. How about that! [Laughter.]

So, after that, you know, in Kamakura Period, Zen—Zen Buddhist, Nichiren, and Shingon was angry about that kind of luxurious practice and stood up and, you know, open new Buddhist way to, you know, city people. That was how new Buddhism arised in Kamakura period, after losing, you know, their practice, in Heian Period. So sometime I feel as if I [laughs] we are practice, you know, [in] Heian Period practice [laughs] instead of Kamakura Period practice.

So you shouldn't be lost in that—that kind of practice, you know. You feel very good. You feel you are very devotional, good student, but that is your feeling. Do you understand? So we must see what we are doing, you know, from various angle, and we must feel the crisis of the world, you know, by your skin. Then you are not Buddhist. Okay? To be, you

know, to feel resistance to the old culture is—I can agree with that, but to be lost from this world is terrible mistake.

Anyway, we are born—you are born in this country, and this is your motherland. You shouldn't be—you should not be lost from this motherland. I am not nationalist [laughs]. I feel terrible, you know, if you—if you are lost from this world. Okay [laughs]? That is, you know, my feeling.

Student D [?]: I understand how it applies to the rule about material, but I'm not quite sure how—how it applies to other precepts as given [?].

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah. Maybe, anyway, you are trying your best, you know. And we are trying our best, so something will result. Don't be too idealistic or too luxurious [laughs], okay?

Source: Original tape transcribed by Joe Galewsky (3/26/99) and checked against tape by Bill Redican (12/20/00). Miyagawa Keishi-san kindly provided assistance with the translation of Japanese terms.