Key messages about Kesa Kudoku (Virtue of the Kashaya) 袈裟功徳

Sawaki Roshi was the original, modern teacher to emphasize the *nyoho-e* okesa. One of his most famous phrases was "Shave your head, put on the okesa and sit. That's all." When asked why he found okesa practice so important, he said that to him it was the equivalent of the *Namu Amida Butsu* practice of the Pure Land school. When we put on the okesa, vows are already fulfilled and our environment is already transformed into a buddha land.

The founders of other Western lineages were inspired and influenced by Sawaki Roshi to study and wear *nyoho-e* themselves.

Hojo-san's translation of the robe verse is somewhat different from the one usually chanted in the West:

How great the robe of liberation is!
It is the robe without form and the field of happiness.
Respectfully unfold and wear the Tathāgata's teaching
Widely saving all living beings.

The verse includes three names of the robe: liberation, formlessness and field of happiness.

Robe as liberation

The virtue (*kudoku*) of the okesa has the power to liberate us from three kinds of hindrances to our practice:
- KARMIC: mistaken or unskillful actions
- DELUSIVE DESIRES (*bonno*): clinging based on the three poisons (greed, anger and ignorance)
- RETRIBUTION: obstances that arise because of circumstances of our past

Any practice we do while wearing okesa is a seed of prajna, both a cultivation and a manifestation of wisdom. Thus the okesa supports our vow to liberate others as well as ourselves. The tradition is replete with teaching that seeing, touching or wearing an okesa even briefly is transformative.

It's said that among the Buddha's vows were five related to the okesa. He said that those who wear and revere the okesa would be free from the following:

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

Robe as formlessness

The Diamond Sutra says if we see the formlessness of each form, we see the Tathagata, or the reality of all beings. Dogen Zenji says that instead we need to see form as form and formlessness as formlessness and then we see the Tathagata; ***he doesn't negate form or ritual practice with objects like the okesa***. He says that the okesa is neither man-made (conditioned) nor not man-made (unconditioned).

Robe as field of happiness

The field comes from the traditional story in which Buddha needed to create a robe to distinguish his followers from those of other teachers. He asked Ananda to make a robe using the pattern of the rice field. In the robe verse, **the field also represents the day to day world of our activities and responsibiities that becomes our field of happiness, meaning or virtue.**

To unfold and wear the Tathatgata's teachings is what we literally do following the robe verse, but also we carry and share the dharma in the world, making it available to others and embodying practice and the teachings.

The final line of the verse echoes the first bodhisattva vow; we help beings without picking and choosing the time and place or who we're helping

Our relationship with the intimate things of our daily lives (food, clothing and shelter) is a reflection of our relationship with the myriad dharmas, seeing all things as the dharma or suchness, without judgement,

including the materials of the okesa. Even if we don't understand everything Dogen or Buddha are teaching, we can physically do what they did in wearing the okesa as an expression of practice

We can consider the okesa in the same way that we consider the three kinds of three treasures:

	Absolute	**Manifesting**	**Maintaining**
Buddha	Awakening	Shakyamuni	Images
Dharma	Reality	Teachings	Sutras
Sangha	All beings	Homeleavers	Sangha
Okesa	Interconnection	First robe	Our robes

Hojo-san says there are four meanings of the okesa in Dogen's writings:

- *Historical first robe created by Ananda and Shakyamuni*

- *Network of interdependent origination:*

The robe is made up of small pieces and is also one thing. The power of the okesa means we don't have to rely only on our own aspiration and willpower; **we can rely on the okesa as the network of interdependent origination.** It's a sort of talisman to protect body and mind as we practice.

- *Dharma transmission:*

Transmission of dharma and robe is transmission of both one thing and two things. The absolute okesa of interconnection means that there is no transmission across space and time and nothing to transmit because we're all already in the middle of interconnection. The network is what's been transmitted from the seven buddhas before Buddha down to us (Shakyamuni's "transmission" was supposedly from Kasho Butsu, the seventh Buddha). This is why images of Shakyamuni show him wearing okesa before his awakening and before his request to Ananda to make a robe using the rice field pattern.

The absolute okesa has no length and breadth and so it fits each successive Buddha, who also has no physical measurements.

- *Our individual robes in use today*

There are three kinds of okesa:
- 5-*jo:* general activity and errands
- 7-*jo:* practice and ceremonies with the sangha
- 9-*jo:* teaching and leading formal practice (or visiting the king or emperor!)

Okesa with an odd number of panels between 9 and 25 are all called *daijo* and are all used the same way. All of them are lined, and are sometimes referred to in early writings as double-layered robes.

Our robes aren't really "ours" since they are the product of many people's effort and the the entire functioning of the universe. We should be grateful to and for them for supporting our practice and for this chance to meet the dharma. Our vows and our lives of practice are offerings to them and to the three treasures, as well as to our ancestors who wore the robe and kept the tradition to hand down to us. **Although we receive the robe from a teacher, it's actually been transmitted to us by Buddha.**

As individuals, we make, wear and take care of our robes as representations of an authentically transmitted dharma. We do that in formal ways that involve ritual and process. Good circumstances have led to our making and wearing okesa, and we should be grateful for that. **There are many rules strictly observed about the way to handle and wear the okesa** as well as stories about those who did and did not take the appropriate reverential attitude to it. The training temple is the usual place for learning these things, where one can receive direction and correction on the spot.

Yet because we're already in the midst of the network (reality), it also isn't necessary to have a cloth okesa and a ceremony. **We've already encountered and are wearing the okesa simply by being part of this one unified reality.** Dogen says we were all born wearing okesa (buddha nature); for laypeople it looks like everyday work clothes; for ordained people it looks like a robe.

We need to hold both of these points of view: not being fixated on a particular kind of okesa or the status conferred by its style or color, and also not losing sight of the forms that go with wearing the robe. Dogen says we shouldn't change the design of the okesa to suit our

personal preferences because it's a symbol of Buddha's awakening, but should find and study the "genuine" okesa (the true reality of all beings).

When we put okesas on our heads every day and chant, we should keep the spirit of receiving Buddha's teaching, something really important.

Materials

Materials *(tai)*, color *(shiki)* and size *(ryo)* are the three considerations of all *nyoho* items, including okesa.

Though there was some historical disapproval of the use of silk for okesa because it necessitated killing the silkworms to make the fabric, Dogen says silk is OK. The real problem, he says, is attachment. **Any fabric that carries someone's attachment should not be used.** If the owner is attached and monks take it, that's stealing. If the monk is attached, that's craving. We shouldn't discriminate between fabrics just as we don't judge the food that goes into our bowls. (Nonetheless, he advocates coarser and cheaper fabric rather than finer and more expensive materials.)

The original material was abandoned rags that nobody wanted: fabric chewed by animals, old clothes that had been replaced and thrown away, cloth coverings for corpses, etc. These are as good for nothing as our zazen. They may be soiled and dirty, but they have been purified of craving and attachment. **To truly receive the okesa is to drop off discriminating mind and really see the fabric as it is.**

Color should be mixed, blended or "broken"; we avoid primary colors since these create attachment and, in medieval Asia, were the colors worn by government officials.

The size is determined by individual measurements. The okesa should at least cover the area between the shoulders and knees, and should be of the appropriate number of panels for the activity being done while wearing it.