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The Okesa

Tonight I will talk about some of the superb benefits of the Kesa. I'm going to read what those are, but I think that there are some other things that I actually want to talk about tonight, that are perhaps a recap of some of the things that I alluded to, on two of the other nights.

The Buddha said that there are 10 superb benefits.

1. Because it blankets your body well, it keeps feelings of shame or embarrassment at bay and shields you with the sense of modesty so that you may train with the good Dharma and put it into practice.
2. Because it keeps off heat and cold as well as mosquitoes, vicious creatures and poisonous insects, you can train in the Way with a feeling of peace and tranquility.
3. It makes manifest the look of one who has left home to be a monk, so that those who see you will feel delight and stay far away from evil thoughts and feelings.
4. The Kesa has the appearance of a veritable jeweled banner to persons of both ordinary and lofty positions. And those who honor and esteem it will be able to be reborn in Brahma's Heavenly World.
5. When we wear a Kesa it gives rise to thoughts of a precious banner which can extinguish whatever is bedeviling sentient beings and produce all manner of happiness and virtue.
6. Right from the beginning, when we construct the Kesa, we should dye it with a loaded color, thereby avoiding thoughts of greed and gendered by the five senses and without arousing feelings of covetousness or lust.
7. The Kesa is the immaculate robe of the Buddha which permanently cuts off defiling passions, because it transforms them into fertile fields for good.
8. When you put Okesa on your body it wears away the Karma from your defiling acts, and moment by moment, promotes your treading the path of good deeds by keeping to the Ten Precepts.
9. The Kesa also resembles a fertile field because it promotes the good and virtuous Bodhisattva Way.
10. The Kesa also resembles armor because it is able to protect you from being harmed by the poison arrows of defiling passions.

Those are the Ten Benefits that Shakyamuni Buddha says are completely inherent in wearing the robe. For those of who sew the Kesa and then wear the Kesa, these benefits will come, in all manner of shape and form.

I want to go back a little bit to what I was talking about in terms of the Four Kings of Mount Sumeru sending messages into our midst, to take care of us - the protections.

I listened to this talk by Elizabeth Gilbert, who was speaking on creativity on the TED conferences. She was talking about how in ancient times poets carried the Muse with them and the belief was that the poetry didn't come out of the individual, it was delivered to the poet via the Muse. Gradually as we came through time, we changed that attitude and we turned the poet into a genius who created the material by herself or himself, resting the notion of the creative act within the individual himself or herself. She was talking about her own experience, of the difficulty of that, and the burden it raises in us, of being so completely responsible for everything - for manifesting creativity at all, and yet she said in her experience, she truly didn't know where these moments came from, in which some kind of miraculous thing happened, that she received some jewel, some truly jeweled moment in which this beautiful work appeared. She thought that it was not a bad idea to return to this notion of carrying the Muse, or that there was something greatly mysterious that was unspeakable and unknown in where this actually came from.

So I want to allude to that, because I feel very strongly about that myself, that “there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in your philosophy.” There is so much we don't know, and we don't truly know where things come from, how they appear. When we eat, we say that innumerable labors brought us this food, and we know that people labored to bring us this food and yet, there are seeds that are food, that manifest and appear in the world and we don't know how this happens exactly. Yes, we can look at DNA, at RNA. And, there is so much we don't know even about that. A new life-form has been discovered on the planet, it is a bacterial form that doesn't rely on phosphorus, it actually eats arsenic, which is an unheard of life-form on this planet. It has implications for interplanetary discovery. So in many ways, as a species, and as a people on this planet, there is so little we know. The more we know, the more we realize we don't know. Discovery goes on for ever.

I feel some enjoyment of this Buddhist cosmology about Four Kings residing on Mount Sumeru. It presents a very wonderful notion which may not be terribly different from our Native American friends who speak of the various spirits that dwell right here on this land, which I also have experience with. You don't get to see them, they're not visible to the normal eye. You can only see if you look in a particular way, in a way that is not “looking” at all. When Jim from the Native American Tribe, came out and visited, he told me about all the people who were here. I said that, yes, I knew about some of the spirits that were here because they had come right up to my face and they had woken me up at night. They can be very nosy and they can just keep sniffing around and so forth, and he started laughing. He said “you know you have the tall ones too.” I said, “Well I'm afraid that I haven't seen the tall ones, and he said, “Oh, they're here, and he started laughing.” So I forgot all about it, didn't think much about it. And one day, I was just standing up front, and I looked way, way up into the trees and I saw a tall one. It so shocked me ! I cannot tell you what tall ones look like. But there are tall ones here too.

So, I like to think that the Four Kings are sending all kinds of visitors here to protect us, to visit us, perhaps to come and enjoy and come in all kinds of disguises and forms – the question is can

we be open to that, and be ready for them, and accept that we don't know everything? In some ways, the age of reason - what is called the Age of Enlightenment in the Western world, brought all this rational thinking - is very wonderful in it's way, but we can become a bit too rational and not have the enjoyment of all kinds of possibilities, and of what Dogen would call "the miraculous." Then I think that Elizabeth Gilbert would say the "miraculous," that which miraculously appears. Where does it all come from ? Where ? We can't name it. Where did we come from ? Where did this place come from? How did it appear ?

So there is this nature of the Okesa then, that has a miraculous quality. It has a miraculous quality because we are also miraculous. Buddha-nature is miraculous. What is Buddha-nature? Buddha-nature is the nature of water and the waterfall, it's the nature of the soup cooking on the stove, it is the activity of life going forward moment by moment. That is Buddha-nature. How does that happen?... some miraculous motion of life, that goes from one streaming, flowing Now - as we have been discussing in our reading - the flowing now, is Buddha-nature. And we are Buddha-nature Itself, life unfolding in a flowing Now, and we don't know what is next. I do not know what I am going to say next. I do not know where Dharma-talks come from. I come with some vague notion to say something and the Dharma appears - I but place myself here and allow something to unfold.

Of course as Elizabeth Gilbert says, there are plenty of times when the Muse does not visit. But then that's not her business, her job is to be there- to be there and to be practicing her writing. And because she is there, the Muse can speak. That is our work also. Because we sit, Buddha-nature appears, and sitting is the nature of Buddha-nature. When we get ourselves on to the cushion, and our miraculous life unfolds for us, some incredible moment, some insight comes, "Oh, my goodness, I see!". But we do have to do the work, we have to show up. Showing up is what ? 95% of life, something like that. And as far as creative work is concerned, it's 99% work and 1% talent. You actually can get along OK without that 1%.

So the Okesa, the Rakusu, is a dynamic that allows us to open to the miraculous – it is not just a piece of cloth. It is the weaving of the Buddha's Body in us, as we weave it into shape. The Buddha's Body is woven in us by each stitch that we make and then all of these 10 superb benefits appear.

I want to talk also about the Robe (Okesa). I said the other night that it is something that is put to use. What does this mean this "put to use" ? I certainly know that in my own life, I knew the moment that I saw Okesa, that I was converted to Buddhism. In just glancing at the Okesa, the first time I saw it, I was converted, and I knew that one day I would wear that robe and I did not know how that would happen. I was raising three children, I had a job and my life was so complicated, I couldn't imagine how this would happen. Then even after my life shaped into the way it shaped, it took me, I think almost by chance to Japan, although I was ordained before then. I did not know how it would shape out. I had no preconceived ideas about it. I simply let my life occur. I wound up where I wound up, in Japan, and this road continually opened before

me. Even after accepting Okesa, and coming back to the United States I still had no idea. And I would tell you, I still don't have any idea. I still wonder about what it means "to put to use."

I can see it more easily in your lives than I can see in my own. I can see in your lives the aspiration of Buddha, I can see the use of your life, I can see all your potential. It's much more difficult in my own. And this is true for all of us - most difficult to read our own lives. We're pretty good at having some inkling about other's lives. Whether they will follow what we see, is another matter. What we see in others is potential.

They're were no rules in regulations that said that I should live my life in a particular way, no-one ever said to me "You should go and open a Zen Center!" Or "you should do this, you should do that."

So there was no rule that said that I should do this or go this way or go that way. There was a handing of the Okesa and with that, is the complete Body of Buddha which means that our lives are completely guided by practice. We have some say in it, we can agree or not agree, but by and large our lives are not our own when we wear the Robe of the Buddha. There is a path that opens, and somehow, all that we have studied and done, is called forth and is somehow assembled into what we can say, "put to use." Our lives are put to use. We may wear the robe and be an artist, we may wear the robe and teach college, we may wear the robe and run a Zen Center. There is no rule about it.

Of course that makes it very difficult in many ways, because the monk is called upon to Realize so completely of the nature of the Kesa and Buddha-nature. One doesn't go about manufacturing a career. It's not about a career. It's about allowing one's life to be lived in the best way possible. This is also true with Rakusu, but in somewhat different way we don't give up the care of our children, or we don't give up our job, we remain in the world doing that work. And yet our life still unfolds in a miraculous way, in a way that is guarded and protected. All kinds of streams open for us that we didn't know were there. These miraculous moments come to us in which something opens, that kind of trust is in the Rakusu, because we are always home. We have come home into the Heart of Buddha, into the Heart of Buddha-nature, so we are always at home. We can free ourselves from all that anxiety, that anxiety about life, is lifted. We still have to work, we still have to look, but we can trust that what is going to open for us is going to be a root that is wholesome and worthwhile and excellent for our lives. While we do not go about seeking fulfillment, our lives naturally become fulfilled. I have had most faith and trust in that. The Okesa is miraculous.

During my training in Japan, we were in the Dharma-hall one day - the Temple where I trained was a National Treasure, so people came all day, streaming in and out of the areas of the Temple where they could walk - this particular group came, these were old people who were infirm and paralyzed, and they dragged themselves on the floor through this long corridor, and they dragged themselves up stairs to get to the Dharma hall, and as the monks were leaving, they only wanted to touch the hems of those robes. I absolutely wept for it, and I was so taken by their faith, I had

to wrap my O Kesa around each one of them! I don't think that they thought they were going to just suddenly be able to get up and walk. I don't think they thought that. I think they wanted to touch something as close to Buddha as they could.

That of course is a country that is hundreds of years steeped in faith in Buddhism and the Buddhist cosmology...there is something in that land that is not here. There is something authentic that's hard for us to imagine, at this point in this country, that that would happen. But I hope it happens for you. Those of you who are going to sew rakusu, those of you who already wear rakusu, that you have a miraculous moment with it, you put it on one day and you really fully realize the Body of Buddha, fully realize Buddha-nature in what you are doing. In that moment of putting Okesa on, that you see that activity is Buddha-nature and that's YOU !

It brings these qualities of the Bodhisattva Way, this fertile field, virtuous field, far beyond form and emptiness.

First Because it blankets your body well, it keeps feelings of shame or embarrassment at bay and shields you with the sense of modesty so that you may train with the good Dharma and put it into practice.

Of course, how could we feel shame when we are the Buddha's Body itself? We are cloaked in the mantle of the Buddha. We are in complete balance, nothing can bring harm. The Buddha says... *as well as the mosquitoes, vicious creatures, poisonous insects.* And here a little bit, I have to question the Buddha and the mosquito piece. I've gotten many mosquito bites while wearing Okesa. However it was a right thing to share some food from this body, it was only fair that, these poor creatures have some dinner on my behalf, just to treat them to a meal.

Because we have Okesa, even when we are not wearing it, when we go food shopping, or go some place people say "You look different ! What is it about you?" You don't have to say anything, you don't have to tell them, because you don't know that you look different. You think "I haven't done anything different, no?" But there is something about you. And this is made manifest in you, this sense of delight that you know that what you choose will be wholesome for you.

Gives rise to thoughts that can extinguish whatever is bedeviling us. A thing that keeps chasing us and chasing us, falls away, and all matter of happiness and virtue appear.

And we wear a Lotus collar, we wear actually a colorless collar so that it doesn't give rise of feelings to covetousness. Is that not wonderful! Nobody wants our Rakusu !

The robe is immaculate, all our life is transformed for the good. All our karma is worn away, anything that we did in the past, that we struggled with, that Karma disappears. Moment by moment by moment, we are on a path of good deeds by keeping to the Ten Precepts. We don't have to dwell in the past. If we really understand the nature of karma, we can live without creating karma.

The Bodhisattva Way, *the good and virtuous Bodhisattva Way is the fertile field in which we live.* One of my favorite animals is the Turtle. As you know the turtles guard our front entry. They are our protectors at the gateway. The turtles wear a beautiful shell of protection on their backs, and this is protection from the defiling arrows of the passions, so that we remain balanced.