

## TEACHER AND SANGHA, buddha to buddha

The entire sangha participates in the development of a teacher which takes many years and is never finished. The entirety of a teacher participates in the development of a sangha which takes many years and is never finished. The effort to manifest a Teacher and Sangha is a cooperative dance that is beyond our typical way of understanding. The appearance of Okesa, the authentic transmission of the great robe of liberation from buddha to buddha, has a life and breath of its own and manifests here and now as the living Dharma beyond time and space so that we may have the opportunity to live in and live out vow in the nobility of the life of Buddha.

Dogen Zenji says: “Remember that the Okesa is the body of the Buddha and the mind of the Buddha. Further, it is called the clothing of liberation, called the robe of a field of happiness, called the robe of endurance, called the robe without form, called the robe of compassion, called the robe of the Tathagata, and called the robe of anuttara-samyak-sambodhi (perfect universal enlightenment). We must receive and retain it as such.”

To experience Okesa placed upon one’s head is to participate in the mutual appearance of The Three Treasures - Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. Teacher, teachings, community together take on the vigorous activity of Buddha in this lifetime, vowing to live and be lived for the benefit of all beings, continuing the vow of the lineage masters. Thus, we cannot remove any part of the reality of the triune oneness of the Triple Treasure. Together we manifest the Buddhadharmas.

Okesa is beyond gender and yet as humans we appear in a physical gendered body. Because I’m a woman sometimes people call me a nun, but the transmission I have received is as priest. There is an essential difference between a nun, a religious brother, and a priest. A priest holds the responsibility for carrying forward and protecting the great traditions of the robe, the bowl, and the rituals of practice, our deepest symbols and expressions. The mysteries, the mystical transmission, the bloodline from Shakyamuni Buddha continues even now and is unbroken, authentic and transforming. Because it is transforming, the path of learning and awakening is endless for Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

When I took the first vow of Okesa and entered into priests’ training, I began the many years of practice and training, continuing now, in the standards for a priest in Soto Zen Buddhism. These sacred standards involve commitment and development through Zazen, academic study, self-understanding, personal conduct and practice of ceremony, ritual, and tradition. How innocent I was in all that would be required of me and all that would test and challenge me in the years following that moment! Okesa is very extraordinarily weighty and yet it is as light as a feather because its power to transform is always ready to lift us out of our small selves. In this, we do not wear Okesa, Okesa wears us and we follow, giving up the small self to a deeper and wider realization.

Sangha develops where Okesa appears, and Sangha too is worn by Okesa. When we live and practice in proximity to Okesa, we fully benefit from the resonance of the awakened realization of Okesa. Even if we ourselves cannot take the vow to wear Okesa, our recognition of what Okesa means still fully benefits our lives. Thus, Olympia Zen Center Sangha manifested where the Okesa, authentically transmitted by Niho Tetsumei Roshi, appeared in this life and gives benefit beyond what we know. It is not the person

or the personality of the teacher that is important, but the recognition of the authentic transmission. When the authentic transmission is recognized, Sangha forms quite naturally because one does not happen without the other. The one who wears Okesa we call “teacher,” and the teacher lives in the process of transformation and growth in the Buddhadharmas as does every member of the Sangha. The teacher is neither perfect nor imperfect and the same can be said of every member of the Sangha.

Other teachers share as I do, the challenge to be a Soto Zen Buddhist teacher in America since Americans bring a particular character to Zazen. Americans have a strong will and energy to want to sit, and a strong will and energy to act with arrogance and to want to have quick results without personal investment. If the student doesn't get something right away, they might blame it on the teacher and walk away right at the moment that they should stay. At the same time, not every teacher is the right teacher for every person so it takes deep discernment for the student to determine this. The teacher may feel similarly, that the student ought go elsewhere, but all the teachers I know try to work with and to help as best they can, each one who walks in the door.

As teacher and student in relationship, we're trying to figure out together how to teach and how to learn. The teacher is trying to see how the student's mind works and the student has to be willing to trust, to be vulnerable, and to reveal her/himself. Together we're trying to understand how the mind and body work and how to bring about direct seeing into the mind. What is the right method, right practice, right moment for awakening? A teacher is focused on these questions. A teacher must maintain practice and not give in to the moods and whims of students, the likes and dislikes, the projections and complaints, or else the tradition and the atmosphere of practice could erode.

It is the student who reveals and brings about the mind of awakening that is always present and is always waiting to be realized. The student struggles with all aspects of life, and if the student can persist and is hungry enough to want to know her/himself, to experience big mind, at some moment the tension will be right and the teacher may do something or something may happen that will blow the mind open and we are all awakened. We all say, Ah ha! Oh yes! I see it was here all this time. We recognize from the very beginning we are awakened in and by every gesture, every nuance of practice - for practice itself is awakening.

In this way, the dance of Teacher and Sangha express constancy in the expression of Buddha. We develop in a cooperative relationship however hard, challenging and difficult it may be sometimes, because we are together, mutually and without exclusion, the Self. We are buddha to buddha, wholly Emptiness expressed.