

Robes of Rags (funzoe) and Silk in the Edo Period:

Menzan Zuihō and Ueda Shōhen Interpret the Practice of the Buddhist Robe

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I. Introduction:

During the Edo period, interest in reviving the precepts spread throughout the major sects of Buddhism. Those monks with strong commitment to the movement would pledge themselves in private ceremonies (*jiseijikai* 自誓持戒) to uphold the full two hundred and fifty Buddhist precepts (*gusoku kai* 具足戒). Based on the interpretation of the precepts of the *Shibunritsu* (四分律) promoted by the Chinese Vinaya Master, Daoxuan (Jpn: Dosen 道宣 596-667), they also practiced wearing linen and cotton robes exclusively, avoiding silk robes, the normal garb for the time. They chose muted colors and soon came to be recognized by the dull color and wrinkled appearance of their robes, even causing them to be accepted as a separate interest group by the Edo Bakufu (Nishimura Ryo 2003). Such robes also fit in with a long-standing practice in Japanese Buddhism of associating black or dull colored robes with recluses and ascetics (Osumi 1965).

These reformers presented themselves as returning to a more pure Buddhist practice, but in Indian Buddhist literature, it is the rag robe (*funzōe* 糞掃衣 Skt: *pāṃsukūla*) that is traditionally associated with ascetic practice. Ideally this includes picking up discarded cloth, washing and dyeing the pieces to a uniform color and sewing them into robes. The ten types of cloth suitable for rag robes are defined in the *Shibunritsu* by the use to which the cloth was put before it was cast away. These ten types of cloth have been:

1. chewed by cows;
2. chewed by rodents;
3. burnt;
4. used for menstruation;
5. used in childbirth;
6. carried away from the shrine by birds, animals or the wind;
7. taken from a graveyard;
8. used for petitionary rites to the gods;
9. discarded when receiving employ-

ment from the king; 10. used to wrap a corpse (T 22. #1428, 850a).

Although Edo period Buddhists knew about the rag robe, the practice was not as widespread as the use of linen and cotton robes. Why did Edo monks in the precepts movement emphasize rejecting silk instead of moving to adopt the practice of the rag robe? In this paper I examine how two authors during this period described these two types of religious practice.

II. The practice of the Rag robe as described by Menzan Zuihō

The *Teachings of the Buddha's Dharma Robe* 『釈氏法衣訓』, written in 1768 by the Sōtō Zen scholar-monk, Menzan Zuihō (面山瑞方 1683-1769) uses a wide selection of citations to advocate the living practice of wearing the robe. Menzan explains that he was motivated to write the piece because contemporary forms and practices were concerned only with the robe as decoration of the body and hence violated what he considered to be the first principle of the Buddhist robe: to achieve the solemnity of the Dharma Body. Menzan relies on two essays, *Kesa kudoku* (袈裟功德) and *Den'e* (伝衣), written in 1241 by Dōgen (1200-1253), founder of the Sōtō Zen school. In these essays Dōgen praised the rag robe as most worthy of reverence. Whereas the writings of his contemporaries typically mention the rag robe only briefly, Menzan cites fifteen different sources, including four citations from the *Shibunritsu*, *Jūjūritsu* and *Uburitsu* vinaya and commentaries; three from Chinese treatises; and five from scriptures. Menzan clearly saw the rag robe as key to understanding the meaning of the Buddha's robe.

In discussing the practice of the rag robe, Menzan cites the *Mahāratnakūṭa* (Jpn: *Daihō shakukyō* 大宝積經) three times. In the first instance, he merely comments briefly that the contemplations on the merit of the Buddha's relics described in this scripture apply equally to the rag robe. He also cites the six contemplations of picking up rags for making robes which occur in three stages of development. First, the two contemplations of the knowledge of what is necessary for nurturing the good give rise, second, to the two contemplations of lack of pride and a determination to accumulate good qualities. Third, this mental state in turn promotes thoughts of not adorning the body and commanding a pure heart. Menzan emphasizes that the rag robe by its nature leads one towards the Buddha's teaching, and that is the source of

its merit. His final citation describes the rag robe practice of an ideal postulant (shami 沙彌 Skt: Śrāmaṇera):

Buddha said to Mahākāśyapa, look at postulant Shūna (Skt: Cunda) who picked up something from the midst of impure smelly and filthy rags, ate little, and when finished eating went to the great pool of Anoku. He was about to wash them when the heavenly beings who lived around the edge of the pond came from far away to greet him. They bowed their heads down to him in reverence and all rejoiced in purity. They took the impure rags (funzō) which Shūna had picked up and washed them so that the impurity entirely disappeared. They then took the washing water to wash their own bodies. All the heavenly beings knew that Shūna could maintain the pure precepts and enter every concentration of meditation and had great virtue, so for this reason they came out to welcome him as a noble person and paid obeisance to him (T.11 #310, 647.1).

By citing the *Mahāratnakūṭa* frequently in this section Menzan emphasizes the connection between the rag robe and Mahākāśyapa, a figure strongly associated with the ascetic practices, including the rag robe. In Zen Buddhism, Mahākāśyapa is believed to have directly received the transmission of the teaching from Sakyamuni and to have been entrusted with a robe for the future Buddha, Maitreya (Silk, 2003). Menzan suggests how the practice of the rag robe could be incorporated into a life of contemplation and worship practices and that it is the proper attire for the simple asceticism portrayed by the postulant Shūna. But Menzan is not simply citing scriptural passages as an ideal of the past. A patchwork robe stored at Eifuku-an in Obama, Fukui-ken believed to have been made and worn by Menzan suggests that he recreated the physical practice of the rag robe as well. This worn and much patched garment is clearly not simply a demonstration project, but rather has seen years of use.

III. The practice of the non-silk robe as described by Ueda Shōhen

According to the vinaya, materials for the funzoe are discarded cloth and therefore indirectly received from the laity, but vinaya literature also establishes rules of direct donation from the laity who received merit in return. These “ten kinds of robes” in the *Shibunritsu* refer to the types of fiber used in making the cloth, namely: linen (3 types), silk (2 types), wool (2 types), cotton, feathers and fabric made from

wood (T22. #1428, 602.1). Although each of the five vinaya specify that silk is suitable for robes, Daoxuan argued that since silk production involves killing silk worms, accepting it hinders the practice of compassion. Although not a violation of these rules, Daoxuan ruled that silk was inappropriate for Mahāyāna monks. The prohibition referred only to cloth directly donated from the laity, not to rag robes. A rejection of silk would therefore have an impact on the relationship between the monks and the laity.

The arguments for and against the use of silk in robes came under intense scrutiny by Edo period scholar-monks who promoted a return to the vinaya. These arguments are reviewed and discussed by a Shingon risshū scholar-monk, Ueda Shōhen (上田正遍 1828-1908) in his *Treatise on the Proper Practice of Daoxuan's Prohibition of Silk Robes* 『南山律宗袈裟禁絹順正論』 (Shōhen 1880). Shōhen's work is significant because he discusses the textual evidence for the abstract moral principle of the anti-silk position from the practical viewpoint of one who has incorporated this position in his own religious practice.

One of the issues raised in the treatise is whether or not one may receive silk for robes second hand. In this case, one is remote from the action of killing as the cloth has already passed through many hands. As the object was not ordered by the monk, but was received already made up into the garment, one cannot say that the monk is guilty of having intended the killing of the silkworms to make the cloth. As Yijing (Jpn: Gijo 義淨 635-713) comments, "If one discusses killing, first there is the intention of cutting off a life; this is how karmic action is completed. If it is not intentional at all then it is not a sin. Three conditions must be met: intention, action and the result. If these three aspects are in accord with the monastic rules (i.e. they are pure), then there is no fault." (T54. #2125, 212.3). In response to this Shōhen argues that if one uses silk, one contributes to the total economy of silk production:

Those who deeply value compassion, how can they covet and wear the silk that causes more and more harm to life? If one wears it then one desires it and this crushes one's compassion and increases one's bad karma. If I wear silk then someone will increasingly harm living beings by making silk. If I do not wear it then that killing will end. That sin

and merit starts with me. (Shohen 305.2)

Shōhen argues that one must see one's own responsibility for the entire sequence of actions involved in making the cloth. Even if the silk is secondhand, using it encourages silk production as a whole. Shōhen emphasizes this idea of a global responsibility at the end of the treatise where he cites the *Shijiki* [四分律行事鈔資持記], a commentary on Daoxuan's work by Yuanzhao (Jpn: Ganjo 元照 1048-1116). In the passage he suggests that the mental world of the bodhisattva is substantially different because he is able to imagine the whole chain of relationships that lie behind the presence of the object: "A Bodhisattva imagines that which comes from afar. Even if one is removed from the act of killing, one is not without the action of killing. Stepping with the foot or wearing things on the body, one is saturated with karma." (Shohen 309.2)

As these examples show, one aspect of this practice is contemplative. Instead of tracking one's own mental, physical and verbal actions to ensure that they are in accord with the monastic rules, one enters a contemplation of all possible connections beyond the parameter of one's own intentions and actions. This practice of avoiding silk robes, however, raises other ethical problems. How does the monk who avoids using silk deal with a donor who comes bearing a gift made of silk?

Shōhen explains various solutions to this problem. Yijing, who accepted the use of silk explained, "If a donor brings an offering with a pure mind then recite a benediction, and accept it, saying, '(This gift) sustains me and nurtures your virtue! Truly this is no error.'" (T.54 #2125, 212.3) But Shōhen feels that Yijing's solution is insufficient:

If there is a donor who brings (silk), then you must explain it to him right away so that he realizes the import of the teaching. If you do so, then he must exchange it for cloth such as cotton and donate it. Or, one can enquire about the donor's intention, receive it and use it for garments other than robes (*kesa*), then it is not a violation (Shōhen 306.1).

That is, the monk guards the purity of his practice by teaching the laity to bring a

more appropriate donation. Shōhen cites another solution that Daoxuan proposed: “Reading the vinaya, I saw that if one receives a mat (gagu) already made of silk, one should shred it and, mixing it up with hard soil, daub it (on the wall). By this means I doubled my reverence for the rules of the vinaya (T45. #1898, 879.3, 18-19).” By accepting the silk but later destroying it, the monk follows the rule for accepting donations, but satisfies Daoxuan’s rule by destroying the inappropriate gift.

IV. Conclusion:

Both Menzan and Shōhen describe these two types of robes in terms of contemplations. For Menzan, the rag robe promotes a contemplation of frugality and the meaning of the impure becoming pure through ascetic practice. For Shōhen, the contemplation considers the chain of relationships that lead back to the act of killing silk worms, and is ruthless in excising the impurity of even a strand of silk. One senses in both authors a longing for a past era in which the robe was properly respected and understood, and a dedication to the idea of the robe as a sacred garment. While both are grappling with the dissonance between their ideal and the reality of contemporary Edo period Buddhist practices, they are equally determined to manifest this ideal in their daily practice. Their ideas are shaped by reading texts, however, rather than by traditionally transmitted teachings. In this sense, they are both involved in the reconstruction of the physical robe and its religious practices through texts.

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