

# ***RAKUSU SEWING***

**in the lineage of Sawaki Kodo Roshi  
as transmitted to Practitioners of the Way  
at San Francisco Zen Center**

**We are deeply grateful to Kasai Joshin Sensei, formerly of Antaiji  
for her patient and joyful teaching over the years  
to  
Yoshida Eshun Roshi, former abbess of Kaizenji  
who first brought this teaching of Buddha's Robe  
to San Francisco  
and to all those who have sewn rakusus and okesas  
and helped keep the teaching alive**

***Great Robe of Liberation  
Field far beyond form and emptiness  
Wearing the Tathagata's Teaching  
Saving all Beings***

Green Dragon Zen Temple  
Revised July 2007

## SECTION I

### MATERIALS NEEDED

#### FABRIC

##### 1) Main Rakusu Fabric:

Cotton - a plain, fine weave, light to medium weight - is best for a first rakusu.

Linen and silk may also be used. Usual colors in the Soto Zen lineage are dark blue for lay people, black for priests, brown after Dharma Transmission.

Amount: 1 & 1/2 yards of fabric will be enough for 2 rakusu. Do not pre-wash fabric.

##### 2) Interfacing Fabric— white, woven – Cut out pieces of the following sizes:

For ‘rakusu face’ - one piece— 35 x 24.5 cm

Straps—2 pieces – 3.9 cm x length of straps (usually 80—100 cm)

Neckpiece— 1 piece– 9.5 x 21 cm

Wash in hot water to shrink, and iron before using.

##### 3) Lining (calligraphy piece) - white silk, such as taffeta.

**Cut one piece: 34x 24 cm**

Starch and iron before using; do not wash. (The starch will help “fix” the ink.)

#### THREAD

Thread for the “*Namu Kie Butsu*” stitch: use Japanese silk thread (the weight that comes on a little card of 40 meters), or Gütermann silk thread. Cotton thread may also be used.

Choose a muted color. This thread will be referred to here as “NKB thread.”

“Matching thread”: cotton thread of same or similar color as rakusu for basting or “stay stitching.”

White or other contrasting thread for basting that will be removed.

#### SUPPLIES

Meter stick and smaller metric ruler

large triangle

pins, needles,

chalk marking pencils: “dressmakers” markers or “Berol Prismacolor” silver pencils-  
sold in art supply stores.

*hera* - A Japanese tool for marking both sides of fabric

snap-blade knife, sandpaper

sewing scissors

Japanese sewing board or a “cutting mat,” (designed for use with a rotary cutter) –

or make a sewing board by covering a piece of good quality plywood with canvas.

(Use spray adhesive.)

Or a canvas board from an art supply store.

## SECTION II TECHNIQUES

### MARKING FABRIC

All measurements are given in centimeters.

Unless otherwise stated, all marks are made with a chalk pencil.

Once you have started marking a piece, such as the face, it's a good idea to complete it without moving the fabric.

Keep marking pencil well sharpened (with knife and sandpaper) so that you can draw thin lines. A well sharpened flat tip works best. Start by drawing horizontal and vertical baselines. Make all markings as accurately as possible.

### *“NAMU KIE BUTSU”* STITCH

This is the stitch for almost all of the visible sewing on a rakusu. It is a type of back-stitch. You will be sewing either on a chalk line, or on an imaginary line just below a fold of fabric. The needle enters the fabric at the bottom of the chalk line and emerges at the top edge of the line. It goes down and back (to the right) and then comes up to the left at about a 45 degree angle. (Right-handed people always sew from right to left. If you are left-handed, sew from left to right.) The stitch should be smaller than the space between them.

Make stitches **about .4 cm.** apart.

The stitches will slant from upper left to lower right. If very small, they will almost appear as dots and the slant will not be so apparent. On the reverse side, the stitches will appear as an almost straight line, or as a series of slightly angled dashes.

Draw chalk lines on a piece of scrap fabric, and practice the stitch (using cotton thread) before starting your rakusu. Your stitches may be quite irregular at first; practice until they are uniform.

Mantra: Traditionally, this sewing is a meditation in which “*Namu Kie Butsu*” or “I take refuge in Buddha” is recited with each stitch.

### SEWING

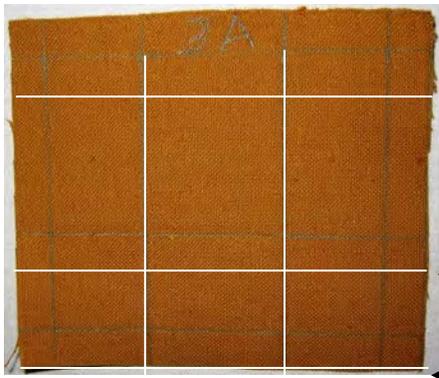
The 1 cm space at each edge of the fabric is a seam allowance or margin. Knot your thread and begin sewing in this space. ( It doesn't matter which side of the fabric the knot is on.) When you reach the end of the line of stitches, make a knot in the other seam allowance.

Use fairly short lengths of thread so that it doesn't tangle. For short distances, such as joining the two pieces of a panel, a piece of thread twice the distance to be sewn will be just right.

### SECTION III: "FACE"

The Face has 5 panels, each panel composed of 1 long piece and 1 short piece. Mark the Face according to instructions in the Cutting Diagram. Label each piece ("1A", "1B", etc.) in the seam allowance. Cut the pieces out. Make the panels by pinning the top and bottom piece together. In each panel, the top piece (labeled "A") overlaps the lower piece ("B").

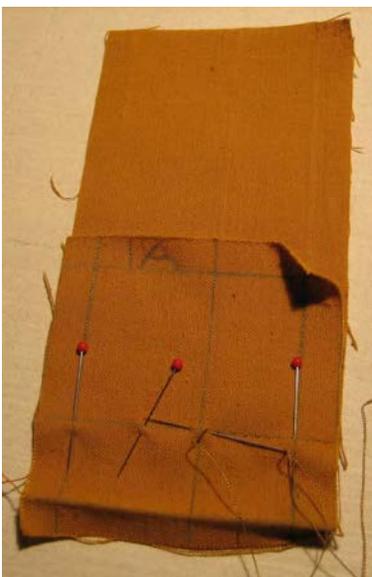
#### JOINING PIECES



Chalk lines will be referred to as "1st line" and "2nd line."

1<sup>st</sup> vertical line      2<sup>nd</sup> vertical line

Make the 5 panels by joining the long and short pieces. The piece labeled "A" is always be on top; "B" is below it. Panels # 1, 3 and 5: the short piece is "A" and overlaps "B", the long piece. Panels #2 & 4: the long piece is "A" and overlaps the short one, "B".



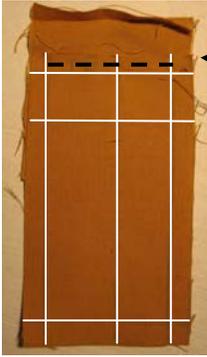
#### **First Joining**

Place "1A" and "1B" back to back. Chalk marks will be on the outside. Match them so the vertical lines match exactly.

The 2nd horizontal line of "1A" **approximately** matches the 1st line of "1B". (This is so that later you will be able to fold the fabric exactly on the line.) Match vertical lines. Pin exactly through the 2nd line of the "1A", and about 4 mm (1/8 inch) above the 1st chalk line of "1B" - i.e. a little toward the edge of the fabric.

Make sure that your pins enter "1A", go in and out of the "1B", then re-emerge on "1A".

Sew on the 2nd chalk line with NKB stitch.



This photo shows the back.

Stitches (dashed line) are in the seam allowance of "B" and NOT on the chalk line.

(Chalk lines on this photo are drawn in white.)



### Second Joining

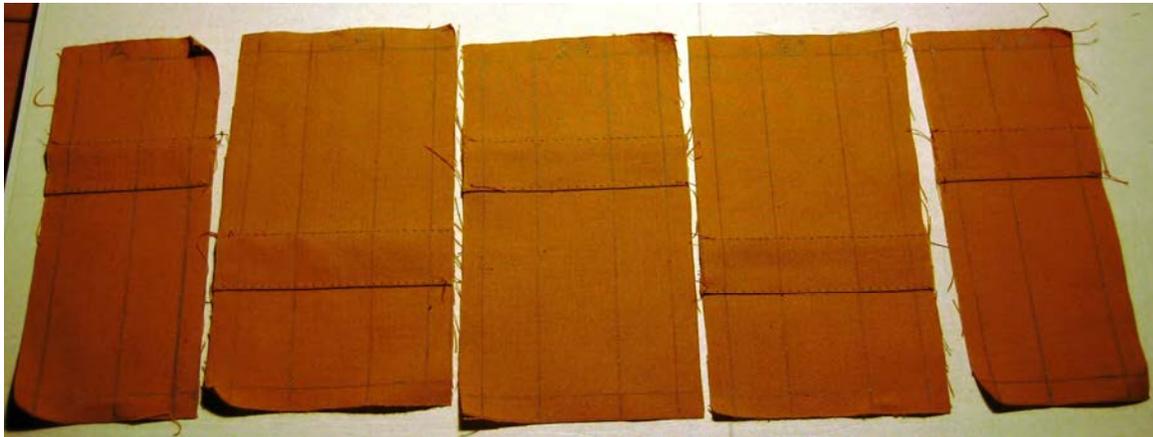
**Fold (or iron) under** along 1st chalk line, forming a little flap.

**Pin** this flap down, so that you can still barely see the 2nd chalk line on "B".

**Sew** close to (not over) the folded edge. Hold the fabric so that you are sewing below this edge. You are not sewing on a chalk line; the edge is the visual guide.

Sew all 5 panels in this way, joining "1A" to "1B", "2A" to "2B", and so on.

### JOINING PANELS TO EACH OTHER



You will now join the five panels together to form the face.

The middle panel - #3 - overlaps panels #2 & #4; which overlap panels #1 & #5.

Start with panels #1 and #2. Remember, #2 overlaps #1. This is the same as with pieces A & B: match the 2nd chalk line of panel #2 approximately with the 1st line of #1; pin and sew.

For 2nd joining, iron under the 1st chalk line of panel #2. Check to make sure the fold is straight, and pin it to 2nd line of #1.

Proceed in the same way with remaining panels. When all 5 panels are attached, turn fabric over and iron on "wrong" side.

## JOINING FACE, INTERFACING AND LINING

Center face on interfacing. Place 1 pin in center. Smooth fabric out to the side so that the two pieces of fabric lie completely flat against each other, and pin at edge. Do the same at the other side; top and bottom, and in all directions. Place pins in pairs (eg. upper right and then lower left). Keep pinning until they are about 2 inches apart all the way round.

Sew with matching thread, small running stitches, about .5 cm outside of chalk lines.

Center the lining fabric on the other side of the interfacing, making sure that the “right” side of lining faces out. Pin lining to interfacing along edges, in the same way as you did the face.

Sew lining to interfacing with matching thread, small running stitches, about .5 cm from edge of lining.

Trim interfacing so that it does not extend more than 4.2 cm beyond seam allowance of face. Trim off the corners.

## SECTION IV: FRAME

The lines around edge of the Rakusu Face should form a perfect rectangle. If necessary, redraw them. The top and bottom should be exactly the same length, as should the two sides. The outer corners should be right angles.

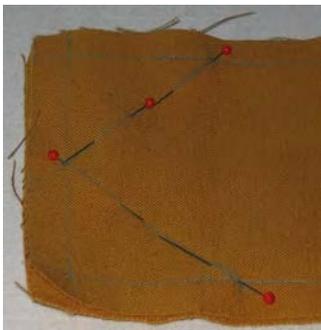
Fill in the measurements of your Rakusu Face on **Frame Worksheet**.

Mark fabric as indicated, with chalk and also with a hera.

(Cutting lines do not need to be marked with hera.)

### **Frame Construction**

Place the 2 ends of the frame together, with chalk marks inside. A hera “V” will be visible on each side. Pin the triangle sides together, **exactly** line to line. Start by placing pin at intersection of triangle and seam line.



Going along the frame until you come to an “X” make the “X” into 2 “Vs” by folding it in half. Again, pin sides of “V” line to line. Do the same with the next 2 “Xs”.

With matching cotton thread, running stitch, sew along sides of each “V,” about 2 mm outside of the pinned lines. At tip of triangle, skip across with loose stitch. Do not put any stitches in the 1 cm seam allowance.

You are now ready to fold down the extra fabric above the triangle sides. Start with the first corner, where the 2 ends of the fabric meet. Bring the right hand piece of fabric down toward you, folding it at the hera line. Fold the left hand piece of fabric away from you. Pin each of these “ears” to one layer of fabric beneath.

For the 2<sup>nd</sup> corner, fold the right side away from you and left side toward you (as in photo).

3rd corner: right side toward you.

4th corner: right side away.

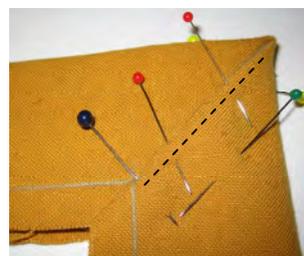
Turn the corners right side out. Find the “first corner” (where the 2 ends of the fabric join) and mark it with chalk so that you can find it easily later. Put fingers inside corner, keeping “ears” in proper place as you remove pins. Match folded edge of each corner to underlying chalk line, and pin.

### Sewing Corners

Using NKB stitch, and start at chalk margin. Sew just on edge of fold, up to the tip of the corner, and then down the other side. Do not sew over the folded edge. Do not sew or put knots in seam allowance.

Be sure that the directions of the folds of the corners are correct:

On the front, the “first corner” will be in upper left. The 2 top folds go downward, over the sides. Bottoms folds go up.



## JOINING FRAME AND FACE

Fold under seam allowances on front of frame. Insert face into the frame. Be sure to put the marked “first corner” at upper left (as you face the rakusu). (It is not as smooth as the other corners and therefore is placed where it will be hidden by the straps.)

Match frame’s turned-under edge with chalk rectangle on Rakusu Face.

Pin front of Face to Frame, without including back of frame. Start by pinning the four corners. Then pin the center of each side, and then in the center of that space. Gradually pin completely, easing the fabric as necessary so that it lies flat. Even if the frame does not seem to fit exactly, it can be adjusted until it works. Use a triangle and straight edge to make sure that the sides are perpendicular, and edges are straight.

Sew the frame to the face, along inside edge of frame with NKB stitch. Sew through face and Interfacing only. Stitches do not go through all layers. They should not be visible on silk lining.

Pin back of frame to back of rakusu in same way. Again, sew along inside edge, making sure that stitches do not go through to the front. Knots should be invisible.

### Middle And Outer Lines Of Stitching

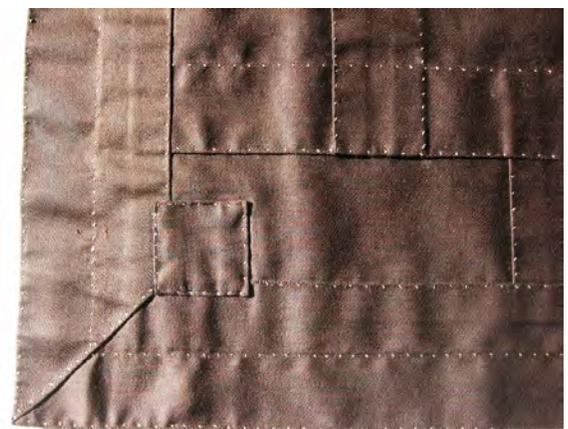
Baste with contrasting thread along slanted corner lines to keep fabric from shifting while you sew.

Draw chalk lines on front of frame, to form a rectangle half-way between inner and outer edges of frame.

Sew (NKB stitch and thread) all the way through the frame.

**Do not use knots at all.** Secure thread by overlapping 3 stitches at the end of a piece of thread with the first stitches of the new piece.

Stitch along outer edge of frame, close to the edge. Take an extra stitch at each corner to hold corner together.





## VI. STRAPS

### Marking and Cutting

Width: 8.4 cm plus 1 cm margin at each edge.

Length depends on your height. The middle of the rakusu should be at the center of your mudra when hands are in shashu. If a rakusu is available, try it on for size, and adjust strap length as necessary. Add 1 cm at each end for seams. Mark straps with chalk on wrong side of fabric.

### Interfacing:

Mark and cut two pieces, each 4 cm wide, and as long as your straps (not including seams).

### Sewing:

Fold straps in half lengthwise, right sides together. (Chalk marks will be showing.)

**Pin** line to line on ends and sides, leaving about **7 cm** in the center, not pinned.

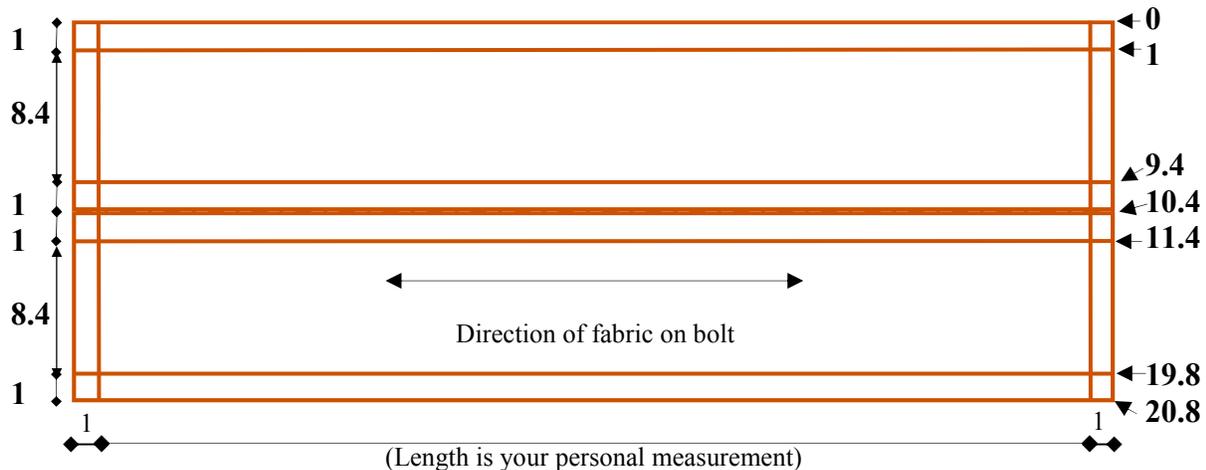
(There will be an opening here.)

**Sew** with matching thread, small running stitch, **2 mm** outside of the chalk line.

Again, skip the middle **7 cm**.

Make square corners by folding over end and side seams, one on top of the other. Iron. Tack (sew) corner folds without including body of strap. Be careful to keep sides of corner perpendicular.

Fold seam over, but do not iron. Place interfacing on top of strap (on top of folded-over seam).



Pin and sew with matching cotton thread; running stitch. Again, skip the middle 7 cm.



Turn straps inside out by pushing with ruler or stick from end to center opening, and then pulling the ends out through the opening. Adjust, so that the interfacing lies flat and seam is just inside of edge. On one side of the strap, both folded edges will be visible; from the other side, no seam is visible. Iron.

## SECTION VII - NECK PIECE

### MARKING AND CUTTING

Dimensions of Neckpiece:

Width: 21 cm

(19 cm plus 1 cm margins)

Length: 24 cm

(21 cm plus 1 1/2 cm margins)

Mark neckpiece with chalk on

**wrong side of fabric.**

Mark ends with hera also.

Dimensions of interfacing: 9.5 x 21 cm.

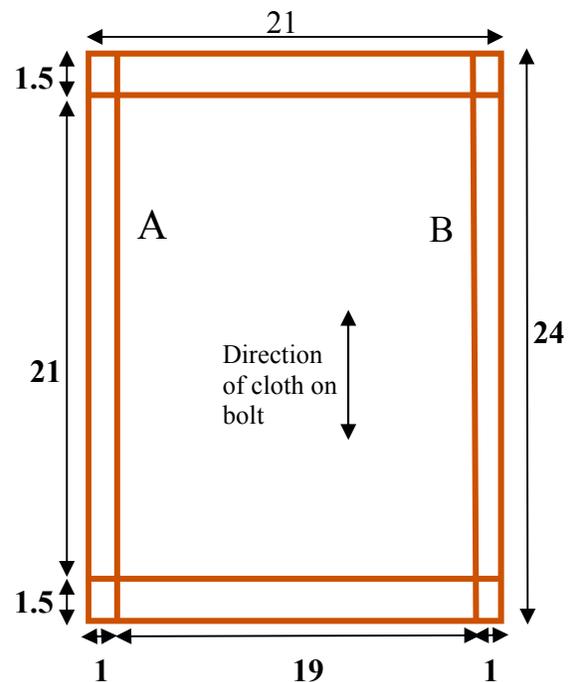
### SEWING

Fold lengthwise with chalk marks showing.

Match chalklines "A" & "B" and pin.

Sew on this line with back stitch and matching cotton thread.

Iron seam only, opening it out, and keeping seam in center of neckpiece.



Center interfacing on neck piece; its ends even with chalk lines.

Pin interfacing to loose seam of neck piece and sew with running stitch.

Use matching cotton thread.



Turn inside out. Fold in half, end to end, with seam showing. Pin line to line. Sew just outside of line (toward edge), cotton thread, running stitch.

## JOINING NECK PIECE AND STRAPS

Mark mid-point of each strap on seam side.  
 Place straps on top of one another, with seam sides on top (showing).  
 Place neck piece symmetrically (seam still showing) between straps.  
 Insert it about 1.5 cm.  
 Pin.

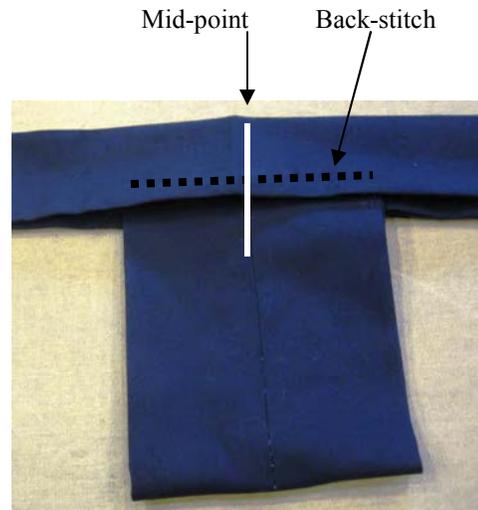
Sew with matching thread, back stitch, through all layers, about .5 cm from edge of straps.

Take one set of strap ends and push through neck piece. Now, neither the back stitching nor seam will be visible.

Iron, making sure that folds of neck piece are reasonably even with strap edges.

Baste securely with contrasting thread so that neck piece is secure for making the Pine Needle stitch.

Avoid putting stitches in the actual Pine Stitch area.



## JOINING STRAPS TO RAKUSU

Place rakusu so that it faces you, **right side up**.

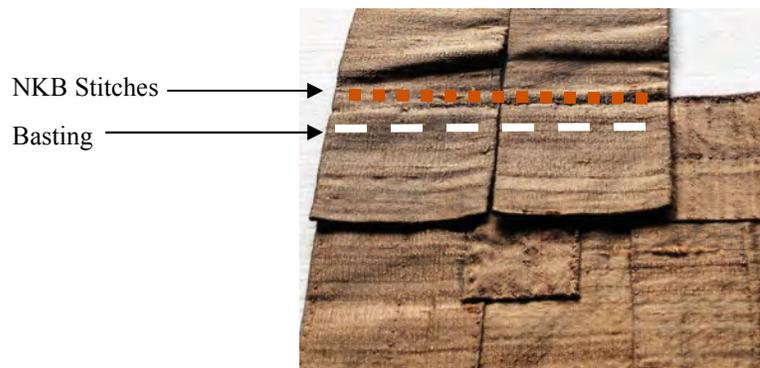
Place neck piece and straps so that Pine Needle stitch will point to your left shoulder when you are wearing rakusu.

Place inside straps at outside upper corners of rakusu. Place outside straps next to them. Straps overlap the rakusu frame, going right to the edge of frame.

Pin securely, then baste.

Draw chalk line across straps, lined up with outer edge stitching on rakusu.

Sew with double thread (NKB stitch) across the straps. Reinforce points of strain (where strap edges join rakusu) with extra stitches.

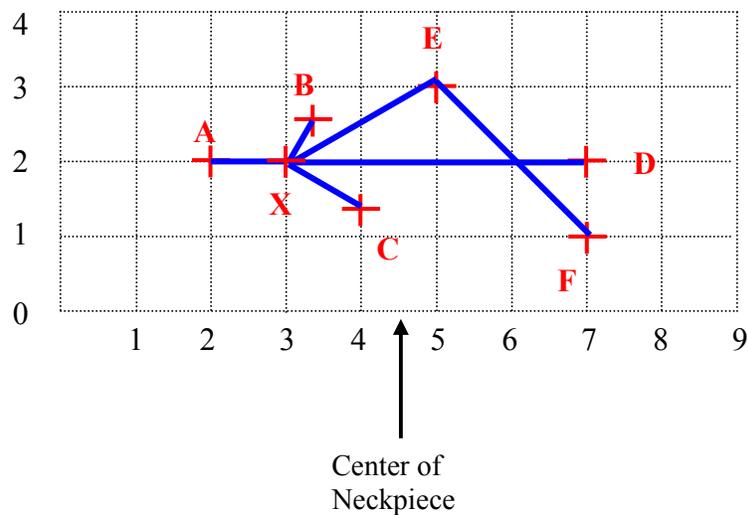


## Pine Needle Stitch

The Pine Needle Stitch is centered on the neckpiece, about 1 cm from the top. It may be drawn freehand or copied from the diagram below. Mark needle insertion points (“A”, “B”, “X”, etc.) in chalk.

Use the same thread as that used for *Namu Kie Butsu* stitch. Cut a piece 100 cm long; thread a needle and knot the ends. (Sew with doubled thread.) Insert needle into the fabric vertically. Make sure that the 2 strands of thread are parallel and not tangled.

A mirror image of the stitch appears on the back, so take care with both sides.



### Sequence

- |                                                         |                                                                               |
|---------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1) Up at <b>A</b> (concealing knot<br>Inside neckpiece) | 8) Down at <b>X</b>                                                           |
| 2) Down at <b>X</b>                                     | 9) Up at <b>E</b>                                                             |
| 3) Up at <b>B</b>                                       | 10) Down at <b>F</b>                                                          |
| 4) Down at <b>X</b>                                     | 11) Up at <b>E</b>                                                            |
| 5) Up at <b>C</b>                                       | 12) Down at <b>X</b>                                                          |
| 6) Down at <b>X</b>                                     | 13) Up at <b>A</b> (but not all the way up.<br>Knot thread inside neckpiece.) |
| 7) Up at <b>D</b>                                       |                                                                               |