

Dogen Sangha Winter Sesshin Czech Republic February 2009

Talk Number 3: Ceremony and Tradition By Eido Mike Luetchford

(This talk was translated consecutively into Czech, and some of the questions were in Czech)

(Chanting: *Kai kyo ge*)

This morning I want to talk about ceremony and tradition.

Sometimes it seems that Buddhism is composed completely of ceremony. People who go to different Buddhist groups to find out what Buddhism is go from one group to another encountering very different kinds of ceremonies and very different kinds of traditions. It's very difficult for them to understand what is behind the ceremonies, what is represented by the ceremonies. Many people try to put together their experience of the different ceremonies and traditions to make a consistent picture. I think it is important for new people who are interested in Buddhism and who are confused by these differences, that we can say something about what ceremony represents and why we follow certain traditions.

Of course, it is not always necessary to have explanations and just to follow a certain way of doing things without asking questions is very nice. My experience with a buddhist group in England who have this approach is that new people first of all are very happy to follow a new way of doing things, a new kind of tradition, new kinds of ceremonies and even new ways of dressing. It's natural to feel that you are joining a group of similar people.

When I went to the dojo in Bristol in England which is based on the Deshimaru tradition, I put on a black *kolomo* (wide-sleeved monk's robe). When everybody puts on a black *kolomo*, they all feel part of the same group doing the same thing. When somebody new joins the group and we explain to them when you enter the dojo you bow, then you enter this way, first of all they are a little confused. But after doing it one or two times they get to know the form of the ceremony, the kind of tradition, and it makes them feel comfortable and included and that they have become a member of a group. However, what I noticed in the group I went to in Bristol is that after some time people want to know what else there is. Is it just joining a group and dressing like a Japanese monk or nun and sitting on a cushion? If we can't explain to people something about what is behind this tradition and these ceremonies, they don't feel satisfied.

The person who founded the tradition which we follow was called Dogen and he taught that just to do Zazen is everything and he is right in a sense. But he also wrote we should explain what Buddhism is. He criticised people who just practised Zazen and did ceremonies without any explanation. Unfortunately, people in later ages in Japan weren't able to hear his words clearly. Because of the situation in Japan at the end of the 19th century which I explained yesterday, when original Buddhism was almost destroyed, monks and nuns lost the ability to explain what they were doing. So they concentrated on just doing it: 'This is

the way you hold the incense – no, not like this, like this! This is the way you hit the bell, not like this, not like that, like this! That kind of tradition is very strong in Japan even now and Japanese culture is very strong on doing things, learning to do things by doing them and not very strong on explaining. Generally speaking, people in Japan are very obedient, so there hasn't been a problem with them accepting this approach. As a result Buddhism in Japan has become a religion of ceremonies. People learn the ceremonies and follow the tradition, then they feel a member of a group, they feel comfortable, like sitting in a bath of warm water. As long as you don't get out, it's very nice.

However, the nature of European societies is not like that. We must be able to explain to people what we are doing. Even if sometimes the words seem to be too much and we don't feel it's useful, we must try. Dogen himself wrote this. Although he wrote many, many instructions and details about his Buddhist practice, in the end he said: 'These are only words; they are useless.' So we should do these useless things.

The reason we have ceremonies in Buddhism is not that they have some sacred meaning. For instance, if you stand in front of the Buddha statue and bow very deeply, you don't receive anything from the Buddha statue; it is only a statue. It is not a real person. If you wear certain kinds of things like the *rakusu* I am wearing now, it doesn't make you holy. You don't get some special power inside your chest. It's just a piece of cloth.

However, human beings do give symbolism to clothes and what they wear. When I wear this, it reminds me, 'Oh, I should behave properly.' I put that symbolism here into this *rakusu*. Or when I wear a robe practising Zazen, it's a kind of symbol of thanks to the person who invented Buddhism. It feels to me like a tent of Buddhism surrounding me. But it is only a robe made of cloth. If you take it off and drop it on the floor, you won't be punished. Although people say, you should never put your robe on the floor, my teacher used to take his robe off and drop it. For instance, if he wanted to go to the toilet, he just took it off and dropped it.

It's not that these Buddhist symbols don't have any value but it is us who put the value in them. The things themselves are not sacred and they are not extraordinary. They are just objects. We put value in them by making them symbolic. When we make this room into a dojo, we feel it is a kind of special, sacred place. But now that we have moved the altar over there and we are sitting in a different way, it's just an ordinary room. We should notice these facts. We shouldn't try to make Buddhist objects or ceremonies or parts of Buddhist traditions holy or sacred. Of course, they are important: The *rakusu* is important and the objects that we use in Buddhism are important.

The point is that everything has two sides; one side is important or sacred and the other side is ordinary. Everything is both sacred and ordinary. When we learn ceremony in Buddhism – for example some groups have a service after Zazen and chant *Hannya Shingyo* and some other chants – it is important to sit properly and to chant properly with other people and hit the *mokugyo* properly. If everybody cooperates, it is a very unifying activity. But you don't get some special merit from it; or maybe you get some special merit from the chanting or singing. Maybe the same merit comes from joining a choir. Joining a choir and

singing the Matthew Passion has the same merit to a Buddhist as singing the *Hannya Shingyo*.

The reason we have ceremonies is to teach ourselves to behave properly or nicely. But if after we leave the ceremony, we go home and lie on the floor and turn on the television and our posture is very bad and we watch a film for three hours until we are very tired and sleepy, then our nice behaviour before and our lazy behaviour after may cancel each other out. People who come to a Buddhist sesshin where they try to behave very correctly and very cooperatively, and who then after the sesshin behave very differently, don't understand what Buddhism is about.

There are other ceremonies outside the sesshin which are more important than the ceremonies inside the sesshin: For example, getting out of bed, turning on the tap and washing your face and taking a towel and drying your face and taking some toothpaste and putting it on the brush and putting it in the mouth is a more important ceremony. Putting your meal on the table and sitting down at the table and then eating with a knife and fork, not too slowly, not too quickly and if possible not reading a book at the same time: all this is a kind of ceremony. However, we don't notice it. We don't notice its importance and so we ignore the ceremonies in our lives and we say 'I haven't got time for breakfast', 'I'll eat my dinner sitting in front of the television', and so on and so on. Then when we go to the dojo or to a sesshin, we behave very nicely, and when we leave, we go back to our habits. Of course, it's not easy in daily life in society to find time to make our life a ceremony. But we need to realise that it's a very, very important thing. We can consider ceremonies important in Buddhism when we are away from home at a sesshin, because there we don't have any pressure. But it is very difficult when we are at home and there is pressure of work, 'Ah, I have to be at work in ten minutes'. Or if we have children and we can't find time to do things slowly, it is very difficult.

However, the basis of Buddhism is to make our ordinary life into a ceremony, not some kind of sacred ritual but just to pay attention to the simple things that we do as the basis of our life. This is very important in modern life because we give different value to different activities. For instance, we say, 'My breakfast is not as important as my meeting with my boss'. Or 'Walking carefully down the street is not as important as getting where I am going as quickly as possible'. Living in modern society we give everything a value, 'more important or less important'. But those values are often false values. When I say 'false', I mean they don't help our lives in the end. If we don't live our lives regularly, then we will receive the result. If we work very, very busily in front of the computer for four, five, six years, without giving any value to our posture, without giving any value to having a break, then after five or six years we will receive the result and society will receive the result. That result may be some physical illness or many different kinds of results from our behaviour.

Ceremony in Buddhism is a kind of model for us to notice the ceremonies in our life. Being away from home at a sesshin we can do things a bit more slowly, a bit more carefully and enjoy the simple things: cutting the leeks, or chopping the wood. Then when we return to our normal life, we can remember that the simple things in our normal life are valuable and the values we have to place on

different things in our busy lives are sometimes false. It takes many years to change our lives, but little by little we can change our values. It is very difficult; it is a struggle to do it. Just practising Zazen every morning is very difficult to fit into our schedule. We make an effort today 'stupidly' to value the simple things in our lives and then tomorrow we do the same thing and then the next day we forget and become very busy and unbalanced and then the day after we remember again. So going through life, day after day, week after week, year after year, in this way our life slowly changes. That is the Buddhist way. A slow revolution.

I'll stop there, though there are lots of things I haven't said, so we can talk now.

What according to you is the meaning of the rakusu and the kesa for practice? What do they represent and how can one qualify to wear a rakusu or a kesa?

The *rakusu* was invented in Japan or possibly China; it's a miniature travelling robe. But it has developed into a symbol for taking the Buddhist precepts. When you make a *rakusu* or receive a *rakusu*, your teacher who gives you the precepts writes your Buddhist name on the back. Then you receive it at a ceremony and that is a kind of formal entry to become a Buddhist. Then of course it becomes important. This *rakusu* here is very important to me because it has very important things written on the back (shows the reverse of his *rakusu* which is blank). Actually, it isn't because I bought it in a shop.

You mean it's not important for you because you bought it in a shop?

No, it's not important for me. But I have another one which I received from my teacher and it's rather old and it's coming to pieces, so I bought this one to wear instead. But if I lose this one, it doesn't matter. So maybe it looks very important and very grand; actually to me it doesn't matter. Each person has their own feeling about their *rakusu*. Of course, if you receive your *rakusu* from your teacher with your name written on the back, it becomes valuable for you, but that don't make it sacred, don't make it holy.

Do you think that wearing rakus and robes can give people the false impression that there is a kind of hierarchy?

Yes. The robe for example is more powerful than the *rakusu* (*laughter from the audience*); it's bigger. But the robe is the same; it's a symbol of something and that symbol is created by us. Although my teacher used to drop his robe on the floor, still his robe was important to him when he wore it. Yet we shouldn't make the robe into any kind of hierarchical symbol. Anybody can make a robe, even if they are not a Buddhist. If somebody who has never practised Zazen before comes along with a robe, I don't mind if they wear it. Traditionally, first you receive the *rakusu* and then afterwards you make a robe or buy a robe or receive a robe. Master Dogen said you can make a robe out of lots of different things: paper or leather or old material and so on and any colour is ok, but not a bright colour. The colours don't have any meaning. However, in Japan they decided that black robes are for trainee nuns and monks. If you wear a black robe in Japan you are a trainee and after you finished your training you can have a coloured robe. But this system is only some kind of Japanese invention.

When I went to a sesshin with Philip Coupé about six years ago (he is one of the teachers of AZI), people complained to him that I was wearing a green robe. So he said to me: "Do you have a different colour robe you can wear?" I couldn't understand why he wanted me to change the colour of my robe. I suppose green has some special meaning for them. But I would like to say very strongly: If they think that the colour of a robe has a special meaning, they don't understand anything about Buddhism.

Why is the tradition important? Why don't people stop wearing rakusus and kesas?

It's quite interesting how tradition develops and changes. I only follow what my teacher told me. I don't try to build up some tradition which I didn't learn from him but obtained by reading books or watching other people and putting it together. The meaning of tradition in Buddhism is what you learn from the person who taught you. My teacher is quite a rough man. He never taught us to chant *Hannya Shingyo* and he used to drop his robe on the floor sometimes; but he encouraged us all to make robes and wear them. So I didn't learn to chant *Hannya Shingyo* and do the ceremony with the *mokugyo* and I don't do it. But if somebody wants to do it, I'm happy to do it. For example, when we have sesshins with the Glasgow Zen group we all chant *Hannya Shingyo*. But I don't put it onto what I am doing. What I do has the strengths and weaknesses of my teacher; but it's only tradition. Tradition is what you learn from your teacher, not what you read in a book. That is not tradition; tradition is something real that you learn from a real person. Actually, after I left Japan, one member of my teacher's group trained to be a nun. When she came back to my teacher's group, she criticised him for not chanting *Hannya Shingyo*. So he started to do it but I never experienced it with him and so it's not part of my tradition. To me it's not a question of learning something new to increase my knowledge of Buddhism; it's simply a question of doing what I was shown. But I don't refuse people who want to do something a little bit different. Does that answer the question?

Yes.

Often people ask if they have to make a rakusu in order to take the precepts? Can you say something about that?

If you want to become a Buddhist formally with a particular teacher, you can ask the teacher to give you the precepts. I don't know about other teachers but if somebody asks me to give them the precepts, I say yes. Part of the ceremony is to receive a *rakusu*; if there is no *rakusu*, we can't do the ceremony. If somebody wants to buy a *rakusu*, I don't refuse. But I think to make a *rakusu* yourself is very nice.

In my opinion the nice thing about making a rakusu or a kesa, is that you can't really make either of them with the end in mind, because it takes so long and it is quite hard work. So you just have to make one stitch at a time – it is a symbol of Buddhism and as that it becomes a real symbol of one simple action after another.

It becomes a symbol of your character...

Ah, yes. You meet yourself. In Buddhism we are always meeting ourselves; it's sometimes frightening, disappointing, happy, sad, worrying – so don't try to meet another self. Just meet the self that you really are.

Thank you.

(Chanting of *Fue-ko*)