



The Fragile Robe of Liberation

Rev. Zenki Anderson

Green Gulch Farm, Soryuji, California, U.S.A.

Now we are celebrating the 100th anniversary of Soto Zen in North America. The care and efforts of many people have sustained this resilient and ever-renewing practice for the welfare of this world. In the midst of constant change an ancient tradition has been maintained and transmitted.

Not long after I was ordained as a priest in 1970, I asked Suzuki Roshi's wife, whom we called *Okusan*, to order a new linen *okesa* (robe) for me. Originally, the robe was black. About fifteen years later, after completing the formal ceremonies of dharma transmission, I was given some brown robes and permission to wear them. Later, I had the idea to bleach my nice black linen robe. When I did this, it came out a lovely, uneven, almost mangy dull brown color. This was a result of my endeavors, which were part of my training. However, I didn't do a very good job of bleaching the robe. As a result of my color-changing activities, the fabric was weakened, and gradually started to fall apart in various ways. Even now, it continues falling apart.

For more than fifty years, I and many other dharma students have made efforts to repair and maintain this fragile robe. A couple of years ago, a kind person skillfully sewed a new backing on it. The new backing is holding the robe together, so it is quite a bit heavier now. The front continues to need ongoing repair. When people see this delicate old robe, they often say that it is beautiful. Even though what they're seeing is a motley robe that is falling apart, this falling-apart robe gives people an opportunity to see beauty. Part of its beauty is in the variety of the stitches in which we can see the kindness of many people.

It is easy for me and others to see that this old robe is falling apart. We may not know what we are seeing. What we are seeing is a robe that is in an open-ended process of deterioration and change and renewal. This robe is not permanent and it is not annihilated. It is a superficial, perceptible appearance of our profound, imperceptible, original nature.

When I wear this robe, people have an opportunity to open their eyes and heart to the teaching that all compounded things fall apart: the robe and me. If we can endure this awesome falling apart, we can experience its beauty. However, if we can't tolerate things falling apart, we close the door on reality because compounded things are falling apart. They

are not falling apart into annihilation; they are falling into bits and pieces of the entire universe.

The way we are falling into bits and pieces and becoming the whole universe, and the way the universe is becoming us falling apart, is our original nature. This is the reality of our life and death. If we can be present and endure the terror of this tremendous process of falling apart and becoming, which is the reality of our life, we will witness the beauty of life and death. As long as we can tolerate the feeling of trembling and awe in the face of reality, this process will come to us as beauty.

Everything is turning into infinite parts all day long, and all day long infinite parts are turning into things. This process is our true, original nature. It offers us an opportunity to develop the ability to live in accord with the terrifying beauty of wreckage and renewal. In our original nature, there is no beginning or end. Nothing is completely intact in and of itself. We and all compounded things are subject to wreckage and ruin. It is in the midst of our fragility that truth comes to us as beauty.

R.M. Rilke wrote:

*For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror
Which we are barely able to endure, and it amazes us so,
Because it serenely disdains to destroy us.
Every angel is terrible. 1*

Opening to and enduring the awesome impermanence of things is simultaneously opening to their beauty and truth. Ironically, we sometimes say that something is beautiful in an attempt to protect ourselves from its real beauty. Doing this, we close the door on the unmanageable and inconvenient reality of our life. We might say that something or someone is beautiful in order to avoid the fear of really meeting them. Once, Suzuki Roshi surprised me by saying that to call something beautiful is a sin. Calling things beautiful might be a way to minimize them in an attempt to make them manageable by trying to put them into a box called beauty. We could also use the word “cute” for similar purposes. It could be that someone or something we comfortably call “cute” suddenly becomes much more than cute. At that moment the door of mystery might open, and we might feel terror.

I also remember Suzuki Roshi saying that our zazen is a great tenderizer. In our sitting, we become tender, flexible, and curious like children so that we have the opportunity for initiation into the vastness of reality. Since childhood, we have been learning techniques to hold the vastness of reality at bay, but right now in our sitting, we have the opportunity to let go of all techniques, at least temporarily. In this way, we learn to be more soft, flexible, upright, and honest like children, like bodhisattvas. But children and adults do sometimes need techniques in order to cope and feel safe in the face of impermanence. We may need to

temporarily turn away from a reality that scares us.

A few years ago, my younger grandson died suddenly in a terrible accident when he was 17 years old. At the time of his death someone asked me, "How are you?" I said, "I'm full of life and death."

As the ancient teacher Yuan Wu wrote:

*Birth is the manifestation of the whole works.
Death is the manifestation of the whole works.
Filling up the great empty sky,
Upright heart is always bits and pieces. 2*

Our family grieved the loss of the life of this beautiful boy and simultaneously faced the beginning of a terror we could barely tolerate. When this beautiful boy was alive, we were not so aware of the terrible aspect of his beauty. His tragic death opened the door of an unbearable beauty. In our relationship with those we love, there is no way to really hold on to self and others. Attempting to hold on walls of real love. If we face the terror of losing our hold on these relationships, the wall of separation starts to crack. When we open to that crack and compassionately meet how we feel, the light of beauty and truth emerge. This beauty is not our idea of beauty, because our idea of beauty just cracked.

The full experience of beauty and truth includes feeling and accepting our human vulnerability. But experiencing our vulnerability may be frightening. We may feel that the universe is going to overwhelm us and gobble us up. The universe consumes us. That is half of reality. The other half is that we consume the universe. The universe is vulnerable to us, too. This reciprocal vulnerability is our true nature. It is awesome. In the beginning of that awe, beauty is glistening.

As the moon-poet, Saigyō, said:

*This leaky, tumbledown
Grass hut left opening for the moon, And I gaze at it
All the while it was mirrored
In a teardrop fallen on my sleeve. 3*

There are training methods, like our sitting practice, to enable us to tolerate being a leaky tumbledown grass hut and to allow the light of the moon to penetrate our wreckage. We also have the opportunity to train by taking care of things so that they show us the truth of our mutual vulnerability. Training helps us to be present with this potentially frightening vulnerability and enables us to be present with our impulses to deny it or run away from it.

Training is not to “get” beauty. Training is to become able to tolerate the terror of vulnerability and thus to open to the beauty of the moon. The moon just happens to be beautiful if we accept and realize that we and the moon are always on the verge of breaking, of changing without being annihilated. Looking at the moon may be exquisitely painful as we accept our mutual dependence and impermanence.

Wearing and caring for this old dharma robe for more than 50 years has been an opportunity for me and my friends to learn and practice the Buddha Way together. In this world of change, I pray that we, together with all beings, will continue to study and practice the Buddha Way without end.

1 Rainer Maria Rilke, The First Elegy from *Duino Elegies*, translation by Stephen Mitchell, Vintage Books (bilingual edition) 2009, p 3.

2 Author’s translation. Source: Yuan Wu Keqin (1063-1135). Yuan Wu Keqin was the commentator of the *Blue Cliff Record*. After studying with various teachers, he became the dharma heir to Wuzu Fayuan of the Linji school. The Chinese character literally is red heart but here it is understood to mean upright, genuine.

3 *Mirror for the Moon: A collection of Poems by Saigyō*, translated by William R. Lafleur, New Directions Publications, NY, 1977, p 16.



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