

Sacred Threads at Great Vow

~~~~~ *Jovencio de la Paz*



Figuring

Between Tank Creek and the hills of Clatskanie, Oregon, just south of the Columbia River, a Zen Buddhist Monastery nestles among brambles of blackberry and tall grass. Certainly there are things here one might anticipate, stone Buddhas and bamboo swaying in groves, nuns and monks with shaved heads like celestial bodies, moons held in orbit by the gravity of vow. Still, it is very alien. I am told that Zen is a religion of practicality. One cuts carrots for lunch, one sweeps the steps, one washes dishes, one sits quietly, and one mends a garment. Do these things simply and directly, the yoga of care-taking, and see that cutting a carrot is inexorably linked to the mystery of cosmic events: earth, soil, rain, sun, the hands of the farmer, the politics of the land. This is not metaphor or symbolism, it is embodiment, and it is you.

I am told that since ancient times, when one decided to leave home and family for monastic life, they would shave their head, receive simple bowls for their food, and sew a modest, patched robe. It is striking to see these objects for eating and dressing handled with such reverence. My own cupboards and dressers are crammed with things left largely unconsidered: disregarded mugs, clothing unworn for years. I look into my cupped hands and see that empty space, first shape of the bowl, first shape of longing. The obsession and the disease are not only the results of consumerism and late capitalism, not merely a condition of modernity, though those developments contribute to be sure. It is that human life by its nature is dis-satisfying; the First Noble Truth of the Buddha is, after all, that life is marked by suffering and dissatisfaction.

In a way, it is curious that mundane objects like bowls and cloth reach such sacrosanct heights in the monastery. In another, it is hard to question their essential role in every practice of daily life.

Far beyond memory, these objects have been witness to nearly the entire history of our species. How could they not dwell in the dimension of sacred things? For the monks and nuns, the robe is not a symbol, it does not point to an ideology that is expressed or located elsewhere, nor does it act simply as a sign of their vow. The robe itself is for them Liberation.

As I wander the monastery grounds, I come to a place where people are quietly hand sewing tiny squares of blue and black fabric. They are making *rakusus*, vestlike garments worn around the neck, the smallest type of Buddhist robe popular in Japanese lineages of Zen Buddhism. The *rakusu* signifies that its wearer has received the Buddhist Precepts, dedicating this life to compassion, wisdom, and ethical action. The sewing is done in advance of a ceremony called the *jukai*, a central gateway ritual through which these initiates will pass, making



Figure 1. Anyu Debra Savalle, *Rakusu* (detail), 2001. Cotton, 13 x 9 ½ in. (Photo: Jovencio de la Paz)

Figure 2. Anyu Debra Savalle, *Rakusu*, 2001. Cotton, 13 x 9 ½ in. (Photo: Jovencio de la Paz)

their vows public. It is not only monks and nuns who engage this practice, but also lay people from all walks of life.

The *rakusu* patches are measured, cut, and arranged according to an ancient calculus, inscrutable to the uninitiated. The colors are a taxonomy of relation, blue and black for students and novices, brownish gold for teachers, brilliant brocades of prismatic silk for abbots. And yet the most prized fabric for this process, according to the 13th-century Zen master Dogen, is waste material, thrown away, then found serendipitously and repurposed. The Buddha suggested that his followers wear robes of patched cloth, resembling the stepped terraces of rice paddies. Those patches were often made from discarded and soiled cotton used to wrap the dead.

The new initiates tell stories of their own fabrics: given by loved ones, blessed by the Dali Lama, found at a bus stop, purchased at a store, saved from a wedding. Textile production could be described as the vernacular of bringing disparate things together, and this process of robe sewing is no different. Yet this particular process of sewing also emphasizes an inverse truth: the original interconnectedness of phenomena, each storied piece of cloth caught in a vast web of interrelation—personal, political, and social.

Originating in Northern India, this method of sewing was transmitted, largely by oral tradition, across all corners of Asia and upon the turbulent Pacific to North America, Oregon, and beyond. Each land touched by this process added its own ethnographic textile traditions: dyes and fibers changed with regional availability, size and thickness adjusted to climate. Practical for sure. The process of sewing is itself challenging though, painstaking even. It requires a monumental attention to detail flabbergasting to one who may never have sewn by hand before, and perhaps never will again. Each stitch rises and falls in the tideless sea of cloth, following breath. These sewers are not skilled, but amateurs in a real sense, committed because of love. So their luminous silk stitches are sometimes catawampus, meandering. Step by step. So it is in life. And though not perfect, each robe is alive with idiosyncrasy.

Some sewers mouth these words as they work, *namu kie butsu*...“I take refuge in the Buddha.” A Buddhist scripture is known as a *sutra*, and that word in Sanskrit is the same for “thread.”

Before I leave the monastery, I walk with a young nun through a hillside forest populated with statues of Jizo, a spiritual warrior who protects children and those in transition. The nun wears a *rakusu* around her neck; its cloth is old despite her age, threadbare and marred and faded in places



from repeated touching and prostrations on the ground. She walks with the palm of her hand face down, touching the tips of ferns as she passes. She adjusts her *rakusu* often, and at first it seems like a tick, like fidgeting. But watching more closely, I realize that her gestures are acts of continual reorientation, of aligning one's body to one's deep intention. It is the dance of paying close attention.

"Is it difficult to give such sincere focus to every little thing you encounter?" I ask.

She laughs musically, "Well, yes. Of course it is. But that is the weight of freedom."

Jovencio de la Paz is an artist, weaver, and educator. He received an MFA in Fibers from the Cranbrook Academy of Art (2012) and a BFA with an emphasis on Fiber and Material Studies from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (2008). His current work explores the intersecting histories of weaving and modern computers. Trained in traditional processes of weaving, dye, and stitch-work, but reveling in the complexities and contradictions of digital culture, de la Paz works to find relationships between concerns of language, embodiment, pattern, and code with broad concerns of ancient technology, speculative futures, and the phenomenon of emergence. He is currently Assistant Professor and Curricular Head of Fibers at the University of Oregon. For more information, see [www.jovenciodelapaz.com](http://www.jovenciodelapaz.com).



Figure 3.  
Anonymous,  
*Rakusu*  
(*Nyoho-e*)  
(detail) 2015.  
Cotton, silk,  
hemp, 13 x 9 1/2 in.  
(Photo: Jovencio  
de la Paz)

Figure 4.  
Anonymous,  
*Rakusu*  
(*Nyoho-e*), 2015.  
Cotton, silk,  
hemp, 13 x 9 1/2 in.  
(Photo: Jovencio  
de la Paz)