

Rewrites: Tomoe Katagiri, Humble Master of Zen Sewing
Ben Connelly for Tricycle 7/28/16

In the light of a few old lamps, in a plain basement which she had visited for months to meticulously sew, in meditative silence, the robe for her ordination as a Soto Zen priest, Susan Hagler neared the final stitch. Months of difficult hand work was coming to an end. Her sewing teacher, Tomoe Katagiri, had been at her side through many challenges. They had removed and re-sewn hours worth of stitches that were made to faulty measurements. With her needle poised above the black fabric, she broke the silence to ask Tomoe, “is there anything to be said for the final stitch?” Tomoe replied, “The last stitch is the same as the first,” and returned to her needle and thread.

Since 1971, when Tomoe Katagiri became the first person to teach the hand-sewing of Zen robes in the United States, countless priests and lay people have dived into this deep and transformative practice. It is now central to most American Soto Zen rites of passage, and is the main mode of practice for many devoted students and teachers. Tomoe and the late Blanche Hartman, former Abbess of San Francisco Zen Center, are widely considered to be the great matriarchs of American Zen sewing. All over the country people have found inspiration in Tomoe’s book, *Study of the Okesa, Nyoho-e, Buddha’s Robe*, and for forty years people have come to practice by her side. Nyoho-e means the wearing and sewing of the robe as Buddhadharmā. It is an ancient tradition, which is no longer widely practiced in Japan. There robes are generally purchased, but in 1971 Eshun Yoshida, a Nyoho-e teacher and abbess of Kaizenji temple in Japan, was visiting the US and encouraged Shunryu Suzuki and his assistant Dainin Katagiri to begin the practice at San Francisco Zen Center. These two were helping to birth a burgeoning interest in Zen in America. Their students

and teachings have been central to its spreading for the past fifty years. Katagiri asked his wife, Tomoe, to learn Nyoho-e from Yoshida. There was no time to lose, as no one in the US knew how to teach the practice, and Yoshida would return to Japan in a week. Tomoe dove into studying under the master's tutelage. The training was intense and non-stop, kneeling on the ground in the Japanese style to work with fabric and thread. "After the first day of studying with her I could barely walk." Tomoe recalls.

Sewing the okesa, a full body robe, and the rakusu, a small version of the okesa that is worn hanging around the neck like a bib, is done with meditative concentration. Generally, people sew a rakusu to prepare for initiation, and an okesa for ordination. The sewing is done with only necessary speech, totally focusing on the task at hand. When I first studied with Tomoe she taught me deep respect for the practice. "With each stitch we take refuge in the three jewels of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Before and after sewing we offer incense and do three full bows." In a Soto service, usually the teacher leads the bows. As he or she leans forward to start the bow, everyone else follows. When I was sewing with Tomoe, though, I could never tell if she was leading the bows, or if I was. I asked her once. She said, "Yes."

Heading to Tomoe's to interview her for this article, I was worried. I hadn't seen her for months and she had just completed a six week treatment for bladder cancer. At 84 years old, and two years after she decided to retire because she could not see well enough to stitch, I had heard she was down to below eighty pounds. I stepped past the profusion of flowers in the tiny front yard of her small Minneapolis home and knocked. The door opened and I was greeted with a dazzling smile, a tiny woman with an ineffable radiance. "Ben-San!" She's been in the US since the mid-sixties, and in Minneapolis where she moved to

help found Minnesota Zen Meditation Center with her late husband since the early seventies, but her English still bears the sounds of her first thirty-odd years of life in Japan. Having spent the majority of my time with Tomoe silently sewing and occasionally receiving brief instructions from her, I am stunned to see her dive into the interview with an outpouring of stories and dharma, with broad physical expressions to keep up with the challenge of communicating across the second language. Her tiny body, which I expected to be so depleted, seems to pour energy into mine. In her high, songlike voice, she mentions a mutual friend who is getting up in years. “He’s shrinking... Like ME!” She leans back to make room for our peals of laughter.

“When I started teaching I was so tense.” She hunches her shoulders up by her ears. With only a week to train with Yoshida followed by mail correspondence for help, she found herself with a lot of committed students. San Francisco Zen Center was growing fast and many who’ve gone on to found Zen centers across the country were practicing there. “I was famous for being very strict, but English was hard. all I could say was. ‘Yes. No. Please Do it Again.’” Tomoe had disliked sewing her whole life. She’d been encouraged to learn the sewing of the robe for years and had always slipped out of it, but when Yoshida taught her, she dove in. “When I first got called to sew, I thought, I must have bad karma if I have to do this, but later I realized, it was very good karma. It changed my life. Karma, You want to avoid it, but you cannot.” There were challenges aplenty. The measurements for sewing had to be translated from traditional Japanese, to metric and English units, all in a language she was just learning. One early student sewed a whole okesa, a project of many, many, hours, only to melt the threads with an iron, another melted theirs with dye. “I would wake up

in the middle of the night, thinking about measurements.” Through it all Tomoe persevered; Yoshida’s inspiration was powerful.

If there’s one word that comes up a lot when you talk to people who studied with Tomoe, it is “fierce.” Kaaren Wiken, who along with Rosemary Taylor, and Kyoku Tracey Welan, have been authorized to teach by Tomoe, told me, “It never ceases to amaze me that this tiny petite friend I love to hang out with, cooking, hiking, sharing funny stories.....can in an instant morph into a huge fierce Zen Teacher ready to cut through delusion.” It is not uncommon to feel some aversion when your teacher tells you to pull out a few hours worth of stitches and “Do it again, please.” Tomoe is known for being uncompromising in her commitment to doing the practice well and wholeheartedly. As Andrea Martin put it, “She consistently conveys the truth that everything matters.”

One student finished a row of stitches a few minutes before the end of the sewing period, packed up his things and sat still while another student sewed. Tomoe’s eyes flashed. “Two works!” He picked his sewing back up and never sat idle during sewing practice again. Her perseverance shows in many ways. Though these days we usually buy simple, non-flashy fabrics for Nyoho-e, one student was trying to make a rakusu of discarded scraps in the traditional ancient way. Some of the found material was extremely hard to work with and she finally surrendered, throwing pieces she’d labored over at length back into the trash. Tomoe scooped them out and said, “You wanted to give it life, we give it life.” She showed her the way to hold it together, breaking a few of Nyoho-e’s strict rules to make it work. As Tomoe says, “The spirit is more important than the rule.”

It is very hard to describe what is surely most essential about Tomoe’s teaching, which does not involve words, but is just her silent,

concentrated effort of putting in one stitch at a time by her student's side. By far the majority of my time with her has been in this way. And yet, when I needed help, she'd always immediately respond, "yes." Her verbal teachings were mostly concentrated on showing how to really care for correct, precise, measurements, for beautiful consistent stitches. She could, though, let out, crystalline, koan-like teachings in the vast space of the silent practice, teachings that call you deeper into the mystery. One student confessed in the middle of sewing practice, "Sometimes, I worry I'm not good enough to be a Zen priest." Tomoe replied, "Yes, forever."

Appreciation for humility suffuses Tomoe's teaching and life. She is consistent in asserting that she has little talent for sewing. "In the beginning I was very awkward so I could absorb more because of the difficulty. Anyone can do it! Many of my students are more talented than I am. I can't make it very well, but still I can help people." Many whose lives revolve around supporting Zen practice are ordained, but not Tomoe. I asked her why. "A lot of people wanted me to ordain, but it was not a call from inside. I considered it. I wasn't sure what to do." She asked her husband, Dainin Katagiri. He said, "You've seen how much it takes people away from children to be ordained. Can you do it?" I said, "I can't" He said, "So you know." Tomoe made it clear to me that she's grateful that her husband helped her trust what she already knew, and Tomoe did receive a robe and bowl, but not ordination, from Yoshida roshi in Japan in 1980 in a formal ceremony.

Tomoe and Dainin Katagiri had two boys, first Yasuhiko then Ejo, and she has a deep well of stories about them. She told me, "One day when he was in kindergarten I saw Ejo dragging his laundry to the basement." She mimes his tiny struggle. "I said, it's ok, Ejo, I will do it for you." He replied, "But I see Yasuhiko wash his clothes." She says both her

boys, now parents, still sew. “If you are doing something, children are watching and learning.”

Tomoe trusts teaching by doing simple things consistently. She used to teach large groups sewing rakusus for initiation. They would meet weekly for a summer to sit silently and stitch with Tomoe checking their work, measuring seams and stitches, or stepping in to help if someone could not find the way. Some people were much quicker than others and would finish early. “They would not come back.” One day, though, a man finished, and the next week he was there in his same seat to help others finish. She smiles in the telling. “After that more and more people would come back to help.” “And you didn’t say anything?”, I ask. “No.”

Tomoe knows sometimes words just get in the way. She never had a formal ceremony to transmit the teaching to Kyoku, Kaaren, and Rosemary. “There is a kind of transmission that is a big ceremony, but there is also eye to eye transmission. No ceremony. No title.” She emphasized that it is very important to check with your teacher before helping others to sew as a teacher. “My students know it is a big responsibility.” Rosemary told me, “I didn’t know I was her student for a long time. There was no talking about it. Then I just realized, ‘I guess I’m her sewing student.’”

In Tomoe’s teaching there is room for things to change naturally through commitment to practice . She told me that over the years, “I became milder. I don’t know when. I used to always say “Do again please”, if some stitches were wrong, but now when I see someone is wholehearted, even if their sewing is not so skillful, I may be more mild. At first, helping people, I wanted to make sure people do exactly as Yoshida Roshi taught me, so I was very strict.” Later she tells me with a smile, “We don’t know how we will change. Things don’t go as

planned. I am learning.” Many people noted how Tomoe mellowed in her approach. Rosemary asked her about it. Tomoe said, “I decided to be more compassionate.” Rosemary tells me, “I have never, ever, heard Tomoe say anything critical of another person, but when someone was really acting out of line once she said. “We must have compassion for him.”

Many I reached out to about Tomoe were effusive, “She’s one of my heroes.” “She’s like a mother.” Many people told me, “I learned as much from Tomoe as from any other teacher.” These are people who have studied under the most prominent and revered names in American Zen. Rosemary told me, “She is one of the great blessings in my life and she is so ordinary. When I’m at the store with her and people treat her like a little old foreign lady, I just want to say, don’t you know how amazing this woman is?”

Toward the end of our interview I asked Tomoe, what is most important about Nyoho-e. She leaned in. “Through sewing you learn a lot about the dharma, buddha’s teaching. It’s not just sewing! One stitch. Tiny stitch. When you think how many yards you will sew, chanting the the buddha’s name with every stitch, if you count all the stitches, you say, “I cannot do it!” But, if you do *this* stitch: one stitch. one stitch. one stitch continuously, you will finish. If you stop, if you quit, even if you are very good at stitching, you will never finish. Just continue! And when you continue with the stitching you will have many problems. Experience. Yes. That is your life. You can learn about oneness just chanting refuge in the Buddha with every stitch, and your life, that is dharma stitching.”