

TOMOE KATAGIRI: SEWING THE PATH OF ZEN

By Andrea Martin for MZMC Dharma Journal
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Today we know Tomoe Katagiri as a master of sewing all things Zen. With steady devotion for over forty years, she has practiced and taught the sewing of Buddhist robes, garments, cushions, and various accessories to students at Minnesota Zen Meditation Center and Zen centers in the United States and beyond. So it's hard to imagine that in the beginning sewing was something she wanted to avoid.

Growing up in Japan, she watched her mother sew but felt no interest in doing it herself. She was successful at avoiding sewing then, although she did help to stuff the family's futons. Then, early in her long marriage to Dainin Katagiri Roshi, when they were still living in Japan, she learned how to sew something. Taught by an experienced seamstress who repaired priests' robes, she made a *kimono*, the long, bathrobe-like garment, for her husband. At the time, Katagiri Roshi encouraged her to also learn to sew an *okesa*, the large, flat robe that is pieced together in a rice field pattern and worn wrapped around the body. An old school friend of Katagiri offered to help Tomoe learn, but studying would require living away from home for a while. Tomoe was secretly relieved when her first pregnancy intervened and she could not follow through with the plan.

Living in San Francisco in the sixties, Tomoe pioneered the sewing of *zafu* and *zabuton* meditation cushions at Katagiri Roshi's request. American students practicing with Suzuki Roshi at Sokoji temple were using cushions imported from Japan, but they weren't ideal. They were too small and the seams were splitting. American bodies needed their cushions to be bigger and stronger. Learning to make zabuton was not too difficult—they were similar to the futons she had watched her mother make. But the round zafu were a challenge. Tomoe figured out how to make them using instructions written by Kosho Uchiyama Roshi for an early version of his book *Opening the Hand of Thought*. She updated the original design to make them larger, and added an extra row of stitching to make them more durable. Then she taught another person, who taught others, and ultimately the San Francisco Zen Center started a stitchery business.

Adapting traditional, Japanese-style practice garments to American bodies was another challenge. Tomoe had sewed a kimono in Japan, but there they are one-size-fits-all. Japanese people don't vary too much in body size. Americans, however, come in many different sizes. Tomoe's first challenge was to adapt the similar *hippari* jacket to "American sized" proportions. Then there was the more complicated *koromo* robe worn by priests. Tomoe began learning how to make that one by carefully examining every existing robe she saw. Later, Mel Weitzman's wife helped her to master the construction method. Meanwhile, Americans were experiencing a problem with long Japanese-style garments: their robes were ripping when they sat. So a Western design developed, one with pleats below the waist to give some expansion room. Tomoe learned to make the new design by inspecting a pleated robe she discovered hanging on a clothesline.

Despite her early reluctance, sewing had now become a huge part of Tomoe's life. But there was still the matter of Buddha's robe—the *okesa*. The sewing and wearing of that largely ceremonial robe, and its smaller version, the bib-like *rakusu*, is a religious practice with roots in Buddha's instructions to his followers. Today, in our lineage, we make our own *okesa* and *rakusu* by hand as a spiritual practice. But there was no *okesa* sewing practice in American Zen until Eshun Yoshida Roshi visited the San Francisco Zen Center in 1970.

Yoshida Roshi was an heir of Katagiri Roshi's much admired second teacher, Eko Hashimoto Roshi. Although the usual practice in Japan is to wear purchased *okesa* and *rakusu*, Hashimoto encouraged hand sewing them according to the principle of *nyoho-e*, clothing that is made and worn in harmony with the dharma. Although he didn't require it of others, Hashimoto made his own robes. In this, as in many things, he honored the teaching of Eihei Dogen, who wrote about the right attitude toward clothing in the *Shobogenzo*. As a young monk, Katagiri Roshi made a *rakusu* and *okesa* while training under Hashimoto at Eiheiji monastery.

When Yoshida visited San Francisco in 1970 she was puzzled—she wondered why, with so many serious practitioners, no one wore a *rakusu*. Suzuki Roshi had not offered lay ordination for several years, but planned to

resume the practice soon. Since the ceremony includes the bestowal of a rakusu, Yoshida and Suzuki considered the possibility of the nuns at her temple making them according to *nyoho-e*, but it would take too much time to provide the rakusu needed for thirty-six students.

It was Katagiri Roshi who suggested that students could sew their own rakusu. He hoped the skill could be learned in America so that it could continue into the future. Suzuki agreed and Yoshida was willing to teach. Once the decision was made, there was only one week before Yoshida would return to Japan. So Katagiri asked Tomoe to begin studying with her immediately. He said, "Go to Yoshida Roshi with some fabric. You don't need to worry about our babies. I will stay here. Go!"

In the moment when her husband sent her to Yoshida Roshi, Tomoe's heart sank—she knew that this time she would not escape from sewing the okesa and rakusu. As she grabbed some cloth and hurried off, Tomoe remembers thinking, "I have bad karma because I have to sew." And it turned out that the fabric she grabbed in such a rush was slippery and difficult to work with. But as soon as she started studying, Yoshida's words penetrated her heart. Then Tomoe thought, "I have good karma because I met this teacher." Looking back, Tomoe believes that her lack of experience helped her then because her mind was open and she could absorb Yoshida's teaching with no obstructions.

With the project underway, one of the first challenges that Yoshida Roshi and her sewing students faced was the measurement system. Yoshida knew only the old Japanese system. That system had been replaced with the metric system, which was the one that Tomoe knew. Americans knew only inches. It made their heads swim. Things became easier once a student devised a ruler using a dot system to represent Yoshida's way of measuring. Eventually, to everyone's surprise, they realized that these dots corresponded exactly to American inches.

Katagiri Roshi sewed along with that first rakusu class and completed a rakusu. But it was not for himself. Two years later, and now head of the new Sona Zendo in Monterey, California, Katagiri gave lay ordination to Tomoe and presented her with the rakusu that he had made for her.

Yoshida Roshi returned to San Francisco in 1971 to teach okesa sewing. As Tomoe studied with Yoshida, and later as she honed her skills, she kept careful notes. From these notes she later wrote the book *Study of the Okesa, Nyoho-e: Buddha's Robe*, now a widely-used guide to the history, meaning, and technique of Buddhist sewing.

Ten years after meeting Yoshida Roshi, Tomoe received an okesa from her teacher. It was a seven-row okesa that she had sewn for herself as a lay practice. Tomoe and son Ejyo traveled to Yoshida's temple in Japan, where Tomoe received the okesa, bowing cloth, and a set of *oryoki* eating bowls in a 1980 ceremony. Tomoe recalls that she was able to accomplish the sewing in the extraordinarily short time of one week because her husband took over her household duties to support her effort.

When Dainin Katagiri Roshi founded the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center in 1972, Tomoe was by his side, always helping. Her contribution to our story is tremendous in uncountable ways, large and small. She taught us how to make practice cushions and garments. We learned to cover setsu sticks and make wrappers for our oryoki sets. She began teaching rakusu sewing for the first lay ordination in 1977, and okesa sewing for the first priest ordinations in 1978. In 1989 she taught me to make the massive red curtain that completely enclosed the zendo for the dharma transmission ceremony held near the end of Katagiri Roshi's life.

In February 2012 Tomoe celebrates her eightieth birthday. She continues to teach sewing at Zen centers in Minnesota and elsewhere. Priests still work on their okesa during sessions at her home workshop. Looking back on her sewing life, Tomoe is characteristically modest: "I have never felt that I have talent. I am still not good at sewing. I see many people whose sewing is much better than mine." But she is the one who has devotedly taught us and masterfully guided us to follow the Buddha Way through our own practice of sewing. Furthermore, she has meticulously trained new teachers who will carry *nyoho-e* into the future. As we honor her birthday, we rejoice that despite her early wish to avoid sewing, Tomoe Katagiri wholeheartedly embraced it as her spiritual path and generously turned it into a way of life that benefits all.