

# **OzZen Journal Winter 2021**



**Writing • Poetry • Art • Events • Dharma**

The OzZen Journal is published quarterly (spring, summer, autumn and winter editions) by the members and friends of OzZen. The OzZen Sangha is based on the mid-north coast of NSW, Australia. For more information about OzZen please visit the website: [ordinarymind.com.au](http://ordinarymind.com.au)

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## Editors Note

The winter solstice has just passed in the southern hemisphere and I am experiencing the short period of cold weather the mid-north coast gets at this time of year. It is a benign type of coldness compared to other places and the sea stays warm allowing for surfing with the minimum of wetsuits. Unlike the cold inland rivers where one of OzZen's students has taken up cold water immersion for his health (I think?).

This is my first issue as editor of the journal (formerly newsletter/quarterly) and apart from grappling with the mysteries of Microsoft Publisher it has been rewarding to receive interesting material on Zen and meditation for this issue. A special thanks to Jill Kelly-Williams for handing over the torch after her impressive effort as both OzZen secretary and quarterly editor last year.

Andrew starts us off with a letter from the teacher and notes the newly formed OzZen Committee for 2021/22. This is the second year the committee has run and it continues to form the administrative arm of the Sangha. The members are Jill K-W, Jill C, Phil, Nita, Michael and Larry. I will ask them to introduce themselves and say something about their roles in upcoming issues. For now, I will introduce myself as the Journal Editor and Communications contact.

This issue has a long feature article on the Rakusu by Nita Lauren. This is timely given the progress of the precepts study group and the Jukai ceremony planned for the end of the year. Nita explains all things Rakusu. The tradition is to sew one up, which seems like a daunting task for someone like me challenged by sewing buttons on.

Rhys Price-Robertson has been supporting the guided meditation group on Tuesdays on Zoom. He has written a transcript of his latest (and perhaps last) guided talk. Rhys talks about the "fertile void," which is this kind of creative, liminal space, a space of openness and possibility.

Lastly, at the time of publishing, NSW is undergoing a major upsurge in COVID-19 as the super spreader Delta variant takes hold in Sydney. This means more restrictions such as mask wearing for groups. Andrew has already announced that the upcoming 1 day retreat will now go to Zoom. Hopefully, things settle down again before the Yarrowarra retreat scheduled for November.

Happy reading.

Phil Pisanu, 9 July 2021

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## Letter from the Teacher

By Andrew Tootell

### ***Blue Cliff Record, Case 43, Tozan's Cold and Heat.***

*A monk asked Tozan, "Cold and heat come. How can we avoid them? Tozan said, "Why don't you go to the place where there is neither cold nor heat?"*

*"What is the place where there is neither cold nor heat?" the monk asked.*

*Tozan said, "When it's cold, kill yourself with cold. When it's hot, kill yourself with heat."*

Dear Friend,

To quote Joni Mitchell, from her song, ***The Circle Game***: *The seasons, they go round and round, and the painted ponies go up and down, we're captive on the carousel of time, we can't return, we can only look, behind from where we came, and go round and round and round, in the circle game.* However, may I exclaim, if you want to get of that merry-go-round of life called the circle game, don't look back! And don't look forward either. Embrace the moment! As Master Tozan advises us, don't avoid this moment, otherwise we may lose our life. When it's hot, be completely hot and when it's cold, be completely cold. How often do we turn away from life as it is, wishing we were somewhere else or with someone else? Or to quote Steven Stills from his song, ***Love the One You're With***:

*"If you're down and confused, and you don't remember who your talking to, concentration slips away, cause you're baby is so far away, well there's a rose in the fisted glove, and the eagle flies with the dove and if you can't be with the one you love, honey love the one you're with, love the one you're with, love the one you're with, love the one you're with. Even if, the one your with, is no other than me, myself and I! When we are so busy saving all beings, don't forget the one who is doing the saving!"*

I wish to thank all the friends who put their hands up to be on the OzZen committee this year, Jill K-W, Jill C, Phil, Nita, Michael and Larry and thanks to all of you who contribute to the journal. And a special thanks to Jed and Rhys for their huge contribution to the guided meditations. Unfortunately, my collaboration with Jed and Rhys will soon be coming to an end. So we would love to get your feedback on the guided meditations and also do some research on the witnessing project. We plan to send out a short questionnaire soon to collate your feedback. I am hoping that I can get together with Jed and Rhys again, either later this year or in the new year to continue our guided meditation program.

I am so grateful to witness the growth of OzZen, the way in which members are taking over leadership and its movement towards registration as a charity. We are truly co-creating the OzZen way together. Keep those contributions coming in! I wish you all a wonderful winter, not too cold and not too hot – the middle way all the way!



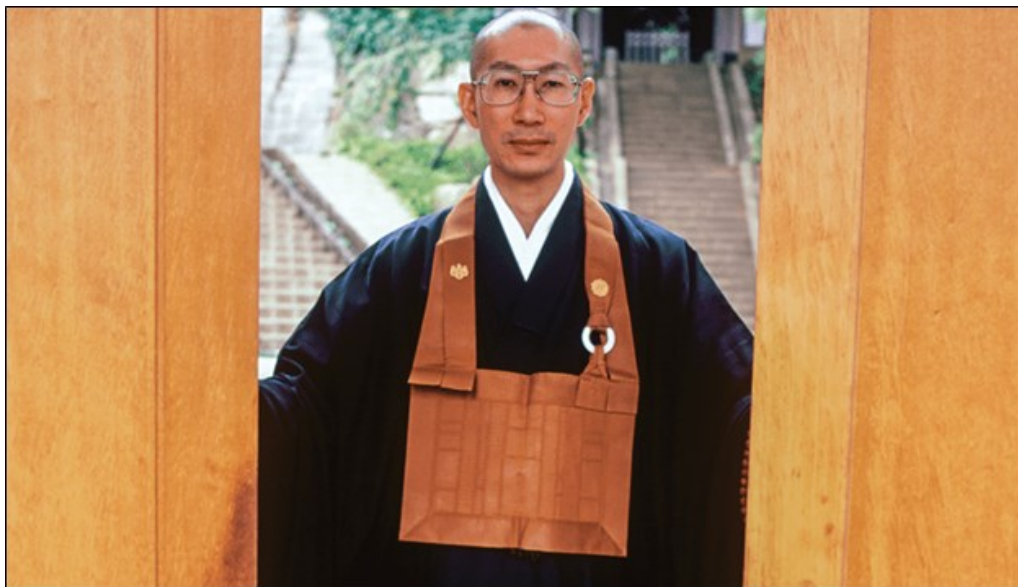
## **Rakusu: The what's what and origin stories.**

By Nita Lauren

### **What is a rakusu?**

A rakusu is a fabric garment that Zen Buddhists choose to wear. It typically acts as a symbol of a person's participation in a Jukai ceremony--where they take refuge in the Buddha and receive the precepts. Rakusu are in the form of a miniature full-sized robe and it is worn around the neck of Zen Buddhists.

A rakusu is made of several cloth strips that are sewn in a brick-like/rice paddy pattern. The pattern and colour of rakusu can be different between schools or traditions. Students hand sew their rakusu in preparation for jukai and take refuge in the Buddha, dharma, and sangha when sewing every stitch. The back of the rakusu collar is stitched using a stitch that represents the student's school. Also, the back of the rakusu is made of a lighter coloured cloth, where the record of jukai is made.



### **History of rakusu**

Rakusu are mainly thought to originate in China. [Barbara O'Brien](#) wrote about several rakusu origin stories. One story suggests that rakusu were a result of Chinese emperors who banned robe wearing and persecuted Buddhists. In retaliation, monks created miniature robes that could be worn secretly around the neck. Another hypothesis was that the daily chore lifestyle of self-sufficient, Chinese buddhist/Ch'an monks practically required robes to be modified. Full robes were saved for formal occasions. Japanese scholars believe that rakusu were the result of Japanese regulations that dictated the size and type of fabric that monks were permitted to wear, during the Edo/Tokugawa era.

### **Rakusu symbolism**

The rakusu design and construction is highly symbolic. Fundamentally, Rakusu symbolise the original robe worn by the Buddha when he was seeking enlightenment.

A rakusu--and full-sized robes--are made using several strips of cloth. [Barbara O'Brien](#) writes that the Buddha told his students to use 'pure cloth'--which was cloth used as a shroud to wrap the dead before cremation, had been chewed by rats or oxen, was soiled by childbirth or menstrual blood, or had been scorched by fire--so basically cloth that no one wanted. So quite often monks would be seen collecting this cloth from rubbish, cremation grounds, and other junk-suitable sources.

In rakusu and full robes, the cloth strips are sewn in a brick-like pattern that resembles rice fields. Strips are sewn together and separated by narrower strips that represent paths between the paddies. Rakusu are sometimes made with a ring that represent the circular clasps used on full robes, though not all traditions use rings in the design of their rakusu. [Barbara O'Brien](#) writes that the Vinaya-pitaka of the Pali Canon claims that the Buddha asked his assistant, Ananda, to sew him a robe that was in the pattern of a rice field. Others say the patterns resemble the rice fields that the Buddha saw while walking on a pilgrimage. [Noelle Oxenhandler](#) has written a nice article about the Buddha's robe if you're interested.

Even the stitching of rakusu is symbolic. The way the cloth strips are stitched together leaves a small amount of visible stitching on the front of the rakusu, with a lot more visible stitching on the back side. [Kuden Paul Boyle](#) writes that this visibility of stitching carries meaning, with the front side symbolising our external behaviour and the back side symbolising "our internal intention of continuous effort". Further to this, Dogen-zenji wrote in Gyoji-Shobogenzo, "The effect of such sustained practice is sometimes not hidden. Therefore you aspire to practice. The effect is sometimes not apparent. Therefore you may not see, hear, or know it. *You should understand that although it is not revealed, it is not hidden.*"

### **Rakusu colour**

The colour of rakusu vary according to different schools or traditions. Since novice Zen priests generally wear black robes--and higher ranked priests wear lighter coloured robes--rakusu are black for Buddhist students completing their first jukai ceremony. Some schools use navy blue for lay ordination and brown for those who can teach. Buddhist forums show a general opinion that rakusu should be a dark shade or muted colour. Forums also suggest that people are quite open to colourful rakusu, since so many different schools and traditions have different colours.

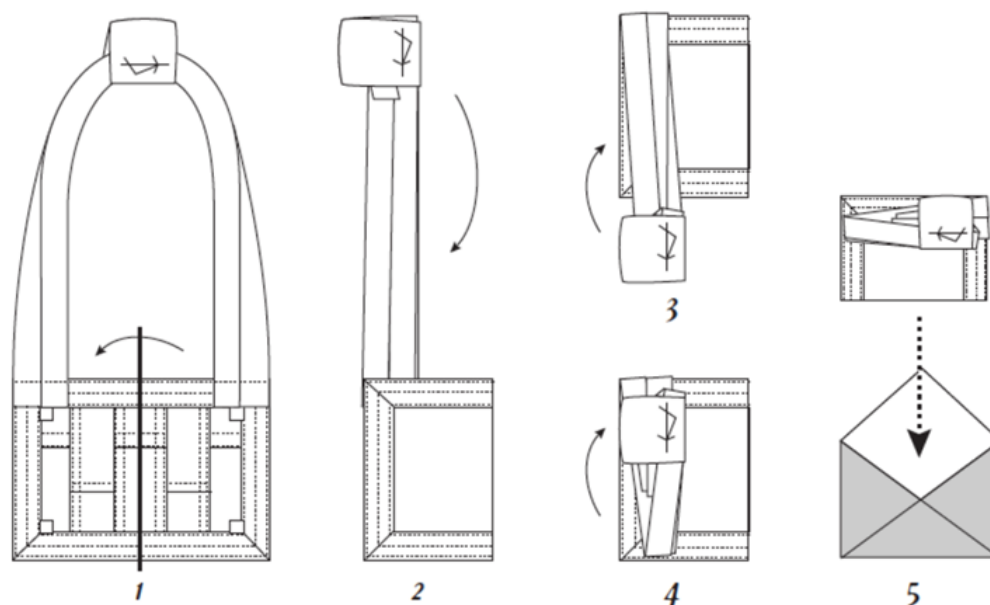
### **Sewing a rakusu**

Rakusu are generally hand-sewn using specific stitches. Hand sewing a rakusu is a rewarding experience for a student and can be done in a group and/or alone. [Kogan Sheldon](#) has written a lovely collection of personal reflections on sewing and wearing rakusu. He writes that a dedicated practice of sewing is part of the Buddhist lineage. The experience of sewing the rakusu is memorable for the student, since sewing a rakusu is an accomplishment in and of itself. Also the experience can strengthens their connection to their practice/rakusu. A cover for the rakusu can also be sewn, which is known as a rakusu envelope. The rakusu is folded up and placed in the envelope when not in use.

## Caring for your rakusu

If you're one of the people who chooses to receive the precepts and wear a rakusu, [Sensei Gerry Shishin Wick](#) provides some clear instructions on how to treat your rakusu with respect. He says don't wear it if you're likely to get it dirty nor when you're in the toilet, and try to take it off and put it away when you're eating. If you need to wear it while eating, tuck the rakusu into your clothing. He also provides some simple care instructions for how to treat rakusu when taking them off to go to the toilet: "When you go to the toilet, take it off by bringing the two corners together and putting your hand behind your head and lifting it over your head. Then you fold it and set it down on a flat surface, or hang it on a hook or doorknob. When you come out of the toilet, you put it back on." [Karen Maezen Miller](#) provides some practical instructions for how to care and wear rakusu; "Care for your rakusu as you care for yourself. They are not two."

How to Fold a Rakusu



## When to wear a rakusu

Rakusu can be worn during zazen, lectures, or during other Dharma activities. Wearing a rakusu generally reminds a person of their commitment to their practice. [Sensei Gerry Shishin Wick](#) writes "just taking the precepts and wearing the rakusu, even though we aren't able to maintain the precepts, is better than having never taken the precepts at all". Peter Levitt, a Soto Zen teacher wrote a reflection named 'Wearing the Rakusu', where he regards wearing a rakusu as a personal decision. He said he wears his rakusu each time he sits, and now "it has the loving voice of a friend". It reminds him of what he really cares about and what he wants to return to. The personal connection a person has with their rakusu is fostered by the physical connection with their rakusu. By wearing it, a person physically connects with what is important to them. Peter writes that for those who wear rakusu, it brings them closer together and "empowers the others to speak openly and honestly".

## Endings and the Fertile Void

*The following is a transcript of a guided meditation offered by Rhys Price-Robertson to the Tuesday morning Zoom sitting group on June 29, 2021.*

Hi everyone. Just take a moment to let yourself settle in, settle into this moment, settle into your breath. Feel your seat in the chair or the cushion you're sitting on. Just allowing your body to recognise that you're here, now, on Zoom, listening to my voice. Whatever else happened this morning is over now, even if it continues to reverberate in your experience. And we'll just sit for a couple of minutes.

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As we were discussing before we started, this will be the last guided meditation I offer, at least for now. All of my previous guided meditations have focused on intersections between Zen and gestalt therapy, so I thought I'd do that one more time today. I didn't mean to do that when I started out, but it's turned into a little themed series. And since this will be the end of that series, I thought I'd focus on endings themselves. Both Zen and gestalt therapy involve attending to endings, bringing our awareness to endings, though they do this in somewhat different ways. I want to explore that a bit.

My therapy training went for four years, and it involved a few weekend workshops each year, and every year the final workshop was focused on endings. And for the first couple of years, I would think, "What's all this fuss about endings? Why are they labouring this point so much?" I'd never been exposed to so much talk of endings, or so much attending to endings. But gradually I came to recognise the importance of staying with endings, and I saw in my own experience how much we can learn if we bring awareness to how we finish things.

We all have patterns of ending, ways we've tended to approach endings in our lives. These patterns often help us to avoid the pain that can come with loss, or the pain that can come with a recognition of our own finitude. Even small endings can be evocative events, they can echo past losses in our lives.

Gestalt therapy is interested in natural cycles of experience: ideally, we have some kind of experience, we make rich contact with the world in some way, then that experience ends, we withdraw our contact, and we spend some time in what Fritz Perls called the "fertile void," which is this kind of creative, liminal space, a space of openness and possibility. I'll quote Perls now. He said,

"And we find when we accept and enter this nothingness, the void, the desert starts to bloom. The empty void becomes alive, is being filled. The sterile void becomes the fertile void."

The sterile void become the fertile void. This is the ideal, but many of us habitually interrupt our natural cycles of experience.



And one of the main ways we can do this is by rushing through endings, rushing on to the next thing, and the next thing, and skipping over the void that opens up when we see endings through, really stay with endings.

So let's sit quietly for a few minutes now. In this time, you might notice something about your own relationship to endings and to the fertile void.



In therapy, we often deal with endings at a kind of macro level, like the ending of a relationship, or the finishing of a job, or the loss of a loved one. Of course, Zen practice also helps us navigate these major endings in our lives. Hopefully, navigating such endings with grace is one of the fruits of our practice. But Zen also points to endings at more of a micro level, endings at the level of *this* moment right now, the moment-to-moment passing away of all things. This is impermanence showing up in our practice, now. Arising and then passing away, a ceaseless series of beginnings and endings. Dogen said, “Impermanence is itself Buddha Nature”.

Every moment, experience arises, and then vanishes right before our eyes. Every moment slips through our fingers if we try to hold onto it. We can't even catch our own thoughts; normally we become aware of a train of thought just as it passes us by. So, in a way, each moment brings us to the edge of the fertile void, if we let it. And from the vantage point of that void, we might realise—hopefully we realise—how much of our energy goes into holding onto things that already passed away, or reaching for the next thing, and the next thing, and the next thing, and the next thing.

So, now let's sit for a few more minutes, recognising or trying to hold in our awareness that every moment is an ending. We breathe in and that breath has passed; we'll never take that breath again. Every time we breathe out, that's an ending, too. By the time we recognise we've been thinking, the thought has already passed. There's no ground to stand on, There's nothing to hold onto. Can we find a way to rest in this fertile void?

## ***Ice in the Mountain Well***

Yesterday  
I shattered the ice  
To draw water—  
No matter, this morning  
Frozen just as solid.

Otagaki Rengetsu (1791—1875)

Rengetsu was a Japanese Buddhist nun renowned for her poetry, pottery and calligraphy. Rengetsu was ordained in the Pure Land Buddhist tradition, but she studied and integrated Zen and Shingon Buddhism into her practice. Her poetry especially leans into the Zen teachings of self-inquiry, ongoing effort, and enlightenment rather than visions of the “Western Paradise” usually associated with Pure Land practice. Her pottery expresses the Zen aesthetic of wabi-sabi, plain and lonely.

(Source: Lions Roar April 11, 2019, author Grace Shireson).