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JUKAI

When I took the vows of Jukai, I knew that the time of playing with the Dharma was over, I was now going to live the life of a Buddhist to the best of my ability.

Tenkan

Fourteen of us went through Jukai together many years ago at Dharma Rain Zen Center. The ceremony was to take place at the end of a 5 - day retreat that was sparsely attended in this big zendo. I didn't know many of the other participants. Since it was one of my first retreats, I was just focussed on surviving from one zazen period to the next. One night I was kept awake by the clanking crescendo of the boiler system that seemed to erupt every 14 minutes. In my stupor, I'd just about forgotten about the Jukai ceremony, not having any expectations since I'd never seen one. On the last day, the 14 of us were seated in the zendo early facing the front. I didn't notice the entire zendo had filled up behind me. I was the first to go up, and after I put on my wagesa (a modified rakusu) the whole room burst into "How Great the Robe of Liberation." Though in my years I've experienced rapture to despair, this remains the happiest moment of my life. When others receive the precepts I feel this happiness again and over time understand the deeper way in which this first step is also its own culmination. Seido

It took me nearly two years to sew my rakusu. One reason is that I love fabric and sewing, and so my rakusu became a fabric project as well as a spiritual endeavor (I used white fabric and then dyed it black). Also, when I began sewing in 1999, my children were 10 and 15. Life during that time was challenging, and so the spare moments I had to sit and sew were few and far between.

But there was something else going on. If I was going to sew a rakusu and take the precepts, I had to be very sure that I would commit to the path. At a

Jukai class in fall 1998, Chozen Bays, Roshi (co-abbot of Great Vow Zen Monastery) reminded us that if we were going to take the precepts, then she expected that we were committing ourselves to practice. I remember sewing in the tiny meditation room of the house where I was living at the time, very conscious that each stitch was a step; breathe in, needle in, step, breathe out, needle out, step; I was moving inexorably toward what I knew that I had to do.

Of course, being also that "fabric and sewing self," I suffered with the imperfection of my hand sewing, the fabric not behaving as I wanted it too or that I thought it should. And so the sewing dragged on. At one point Hogen Bays, Sensei (co-abbot of Great Vow Zen Monastery) nudged me a bit by arranging for an area ZCO member who was sewing to come to my house and sew with me. She finished her rakusu and took the precepts well before I did!

Finally, on March 2, 2001, I took the precepts with Chozen Bays at Fireside Retreat Center east of Portland. It was at the end of a week-long retreat, (during which occurred the "Seattle earthquake;" as good Zen students we sat perfectly still in zazen through the tremors). Chozen gave me the name An Yu: "An" meaning "peace of mind, calm, quiet, gentle, be at ease, without effort" and "Yu" meaning "happy, joyful, delighted, take pleasure in." I was puzzled by her choice at the time, but have come to see my name as the unfolding of my practice rather than a "fixed description of me" (duh ?).

Now almost 4 years later to the day, I make my way to the Zendo each weekday morning. Occasionally I look down at my rakusu, now a bit faded, and with a permanent crease in the middle. The "fabric and sewing self" thinks about how it might look better if I had not hand-dyed it, but as I sit that self drops away and sees reflected in that faded rakusu the wearing away of body and mind, and the unfolding of peace and joy.

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