

Buddhist Practitioners' Garments (*Kasaya*) and the Transformation of Their Functions: Focusing on the *Shuiluhui* Rite

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Abstract

In Buddhism, where the aim is to attain enlightenment by renouncing the worldly, such as greed, love, and hate, monks were required to wear robes made from rags as part of their practice. However, as Buddhism spread from India to East Asia, the robes—*kasaya*—were transformed into garments that indicated the monk's rank and were made from the same fabrics as those worn by high-ranking lay people. Then, in China during the 13th-14th centuries, *kasaya* with embroidered Buddhist motifs appeared. *Kasaya* made from this type of special fabric are thought to have been used in a ceremony known as "*shuiluhui* (J. *suiriku-e*)." This paper introduces actual examples to illustrate how Buddhist teachings, which initially rejected the social power of clothing, were transformed over time and space and eventually came to utilize the power of clothing in Buddhist rituals.

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Introduction

Clothing is not only an essential part of life, but also has a social function. This paper focuses on the *kasaya* (Sk. *kāṣāya*), a garment worn by ascetics in Buddhism, the religion founded by the Buddha Śākyamuni in India. As Buddhism spread from India to East Asia, it was transformed from a religion that aimed at the salvation of individuals to one that protected the state, and the fabric used for the *kasaya* also changed accordingly. Through this process of change, I would like to examine how the social power of clothing came to be consciously utilized in Buddhist rituals.

***Kasaya* the garment prescribed by the founder of Buddhism, Buddha, and its function**

In India, where Buddhism was born, it was believed that all beings are born and will die in an eternal cycle of reincarnation in one of six realms: heavenly beings, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, fighting demons and hell. Early Buddhism was a religion that aimed to

liberate people from samsara, or the cycle of birth and death, by helping them to become enlightened and free from various attachments to this life, such as the desire for love and money. What function did the *kasaya*, the ascetic's garment (**Fig. 1**), play in a religion with such a goal?



Fig.1. Portrait of Priest Nāgārjuna Wearing *Kasaya* from the Eight Patriarchs of Shingon Sect, Kamakura period, dated 1314, Tokyo National Museum.

https://colbase.nich.go.jp/collection_items/tnm/A-766?locale=en

First, let us examine the *kasaya* as a garment in the Buddhist precepts. The precepts are a set of rules for living that the Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, taught to Buddhist ascetics who lived together as a community.

The *kasaya*, or *kesa* in Japanese, was established by the Buddha in India to distinguish Buddhist ascetics from those of other religions. Its distinctive feature is that it is made up of small pieces of cut strips that are joined together to form one large piece of fabric (**Fig. 2**). This form is said to have been conceived by the Buddha when he saw the rice fields and the paths that separated them. *Kasaya* are classified

according to the number of panels called *jo* in Japanese and are called *gojō kesa* (five panel *kasaya*), *shichijō kesa* (seven panel *kasaya*), etc., according to the number of vertical panels. A monk was allowed to have only three *kasaya*: a five panel *kasaya*, a seven panel *kasaya*, and a *kasaya* with nine or more panels, which were worn as work clothes, daily wear, and formal wear, respectively. The color of the *kasaya* was also regulated, and it had to be dyed a muddy color such as brown or blue-black. The most suitable material for the *kasaya* was rags, called *funzō* in Japanese, which were made by gathering up neglected fabrics that had been thrown away in graveyards or soiled with blood and discarded, washing them clean, and sewing the usable parts together.

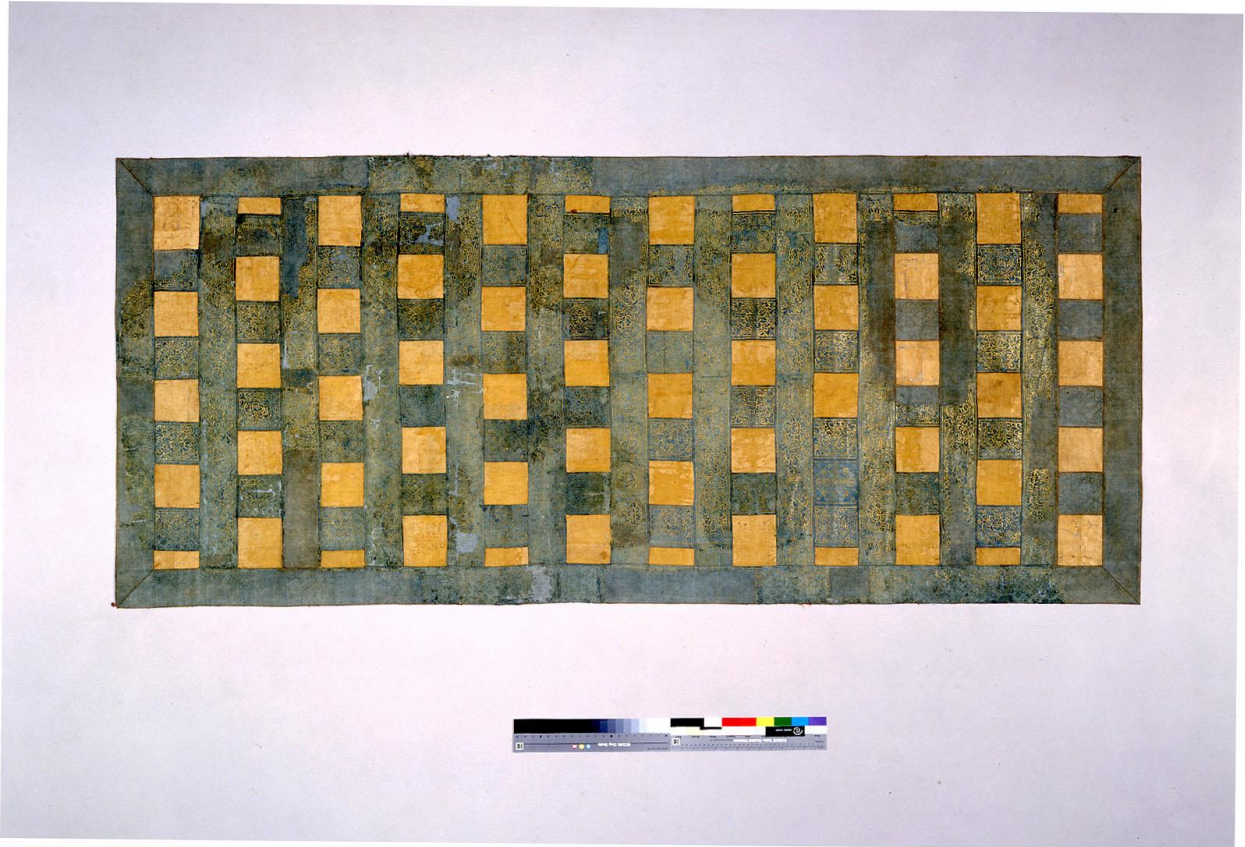


Fig. 2. The *kasaya* construction with “fields” and “paths.” *Kasaya* with Peonies and Arabesque Patterns in Gold Leaf, China or Korea, 13th-14th century, Kyoto National Museum. Important Cultural Property. https://colbase.nich.go.jp/collection_items/kyohaku/I%E7%94%B2308?locale=en

From these various points, we can see the Buddha's thoughts on the *kasaya*. Namely, the Buddha was aware of the various emotions such as self-confidence, pride, envy, and attachment that beautiful clothes can bring to people, and he believed that suppressing these emotions was necessary to lead people to enlightenment. On the other hand, he was also well aware that clothing could be a sign of the social group to which people belonged. Therefore, he established a common garment, the *kasaya*, for Buddhist ascetics, and advocated the robes be made of cast-off rags, which were considered unwanted and worthless in the secular world. The garments worn in daily life would then function to promote the Buddhist practice of detachment from this life.

Transformation of the fabric of the *kasaya*

The Buddha's philosophy spread from India to ancient East Asia and was passed down through the ages with changing appearances. One *kasaya*, originally in Hōryū-ji Temple in Nara, one of the World Heritage Sites, and now in the collection of the Tokyo National Museum, was reportedly brought to Japan in the 8th century (**Fig. 3**).



Fig. 3. *Funzō-e* (Priest's Robe), Japan, Nara period, 8th century, Tokyo National Museum.

Important Cultural Property. https://colbase.nich.go.jp/collection_items/tnm/N-33?locale=en

This *kasaya* is made from layers of plain silk scraps that have been quilted into a base fabric. This would be an adaptation of the concept of “rag robe,” although the brightly colored silk fragments are not dyed in muddy colors. The overlapping fabrics are placed in a harmonious arrangement of colors, lending it a sublime beauty that is highly valued in the secular world. This beautiful collage of scraps came to be regarded as a “pattern” suitable for *kasaya* and gave rise to woven imitations devised in later periods.

As time went by, people stopped collecting scraps and began to make *kasaya* from fabrics of high-class clothes donated by devotees. A typical example is the nine panel *kasaya* handed down from Shōdenji Temple in Kyoto. This *kasaya* is said to have belonged to Wuan Puning (1197-1276), who came to Japan from China in the 13th century to teach Zen Buddhism. It is noteworthy that aristocratic women's garments made of a fabric almost identical to this in both pattern and weave structure have been excavated from the tomb of Huangsheng in Fujian Province and the tomb of Zhou Shi in Jiangxi Province, China. Such changes in the fabric used for the *kasaya* indicate the gradual loss of the Buddha's idea of wearing garments that were considered worthless in the secular sense. The main cause of this change is probably the fact that Buddhism itself had drastically changed its character from a religion that pursued the liberation of the individual to a religion that prayed for the peace of the nation. A religion that served the state required an internal governing body, which in turn required a hierarchy of priests. Monks must have been required to wear clothing that displayed dignity in accordance with their rank. Moreover, the *kasaya* in East Asia was a

very different garment from that of India. In tropical India, it was sufficient to just wrap the *kasaya* around the body like a modern sari, but in cold East Asia, the *kasaya* could not be worn as a single-layer garment. Therefore, it was not seen as a practical garment, but as a representation of the Buddhist ascetic and a special garment to be worn on top of other clothing.

The birth of *kasaya* for ceremonial purposes: focusing on *Shuiluhui* rite

Around the 13th century, at the same time the use of high-quality textiles for *kasaya* became common, *kasaya* based on a completely different concept from Buddhist ideas began to be produced. These were fabrics made specifically for *kasaya* and embroidered with images of Buddhist deities and other figures. A representative example of such a *kasaya* in the collection of Chion-in Temple in Kyoto is an embroidered nine panel *kasaya* that has been pasted on a folding screen (**Fig.4**). Next, I would like to consider the background of the production of such *kasaya*.

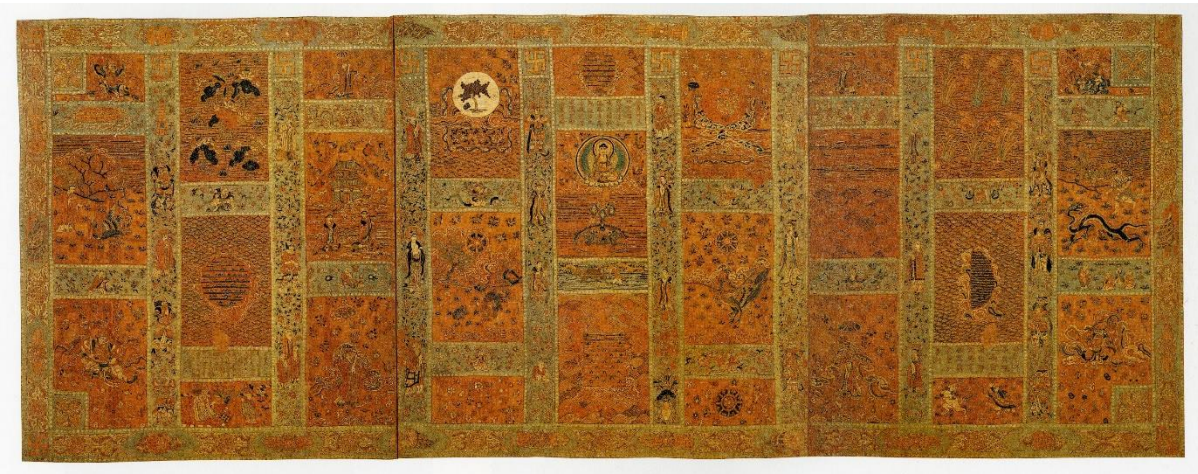


Fig. 4. Embroidered 9 Panel *Kasaya* Pasted onto a Folding Screen, China, Southern Song–Yuan dynasty, 13th-14th century, Chion-in Temple. Important Cultural Property.

The Chion-in *kasaya* is said to have been given by priest Chōgen (1121-1206) to priest Hōnen (1133-1212). Recently, a photograph of a similar embroidered *kasaya* with an almost identical image to this one was discovered in the archives of the National Museum of Korea. Unfortunately, the Korean *kasaya* no longer exists; nevertheless, it points to a considerable number of *kasaya* of this type being produced at that time. Chōgen, who claimed to have crossed over to China three times, most likely brought this *kasaya* to Japan from China.

The embroidery motifs on this *kasaya* have been interpreted in previous studies as expressing the Buddhist worldview with the sun, the moon, and the Pure Land of the

Buddhas under the central image of Nyorai (the Buddha), and as representing Buddhist legends related to the *kasaya*. In addition to this interpretation, I would like to focus on the figures embroidered along the “paths” of the *kasaya*. These include bodhisattvas, male and female deities, priestly figures, and lay people (**Fig. 5**). They point out the possibility that this *kasaya* was specially made to be worn at ceremonies that were widely held in China, such as “*Shuiluhui* (J.*suiriku-e*)”.



Fig. 5. Figures Embroidered on the Paths, Detail of the Embroidered 9 Panel *Kasaya*, Chion-in Temple.

The *Shuiluhui* is a Chinese Buddhist ritual held to appease spirits by scattering food and drink in the water or on the ground. Under the patronage of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, all beings belonging to the Six Realms of heavens, heavenly beings, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, fighting demons and hell, as well as folk demons and ancestral spirits are invited to the ritual space to be fed and entertained in the hope that all beings will be reborn in the Buddhist world. It is known that *Shuiluhui* began to flourish in China from the end of the Tang dynasty (718-907) and were held during memorial services for ancestors and for war dead on a large scale sponsored by the emperor, as well as on a smaller scale for private use. It has been pointed out that in the rituals of the *Shuiluhui*, the role of "dharma master" plays an important part, lecturing on the dharma to the host and contemplating the statues that are invited to the ritual space. The dharma master would call the statues to the site by contemplating various images in his mind and, in order to share the images in his mind with the participants, paintings depicting the various images were hung around the worship area. In the study of Buddhist painting, these paintings are called *suiriku-ga* in Japanese.

The images of the Six Realms in the "paths" of this *kasaya* have much in common with those depicted in *suiriku-ga*. The congruence of the *suiriku-ga* and the iconography of the *kasaya* suggests that it was produced to further confirm the power of the dharma master's contemplation of all beings that fill the various realms, and to allow the attendees of the ritual to share the images envisioned by the dharma master. The *kasaya* wrapped around the master's body was intended to unite everyone with the wearer and enhance the power of contemplation.

Conclusion

This paper has introduced the changing meanings ascribed to the garments of practitioners in Buddhism through a historical consideration of the fabrics used in existing *kasaya*. In early Buddhism, clothing was a symbol of attachment to this life, and the wearing of the *kasaya*, a garment made of rags sewn together, was recommended as a means of severing such attachment. As Buddhism spread to East Asia, however, this teaching gradually faded into obscurity and *kasaya* made of beautiful silk instead of rags or made of the same fabric as the garments of the aristocracy became the norm. During the Southern Song dynasty in China, a major change occurred when fabrics were produced specifically for use as *kasaya*. These *kasaya* were probably used for special rites and were expected to increase the power of the dharma through their function.

The Buddha was very aware of the social power of clothing and chose to distance himself from this power. However, his teachings were transformed over time and space, and

eventually the power of clothing came to support Buddhist rituals.

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