

TREELEAF RAKUSU SEWING GUIDE - FAQ

Hello Treeleafers!

Here's about all that is needed to take us, *step-by-step*, through sewing a *Nyoho-e* Rakusu.

Nyo means “*as-it-is-ness*”, *Ho* means the Buddha's teachings about how reality works, and *E* means a “robe”. So, we might call it the “*robe of reality as-it-is*”.

Accordingly, the most important part to remember at each moment is that, as we move ahead *step-by-step*, there is no where to ‘*get to*’, no where else we can be, nothing ultimately to achieve, no goal in all our hard work ... all is just “*as-it-is*”.

And while we strive to be careful, to tie the ‘*perfect stitch*’ and not make ‘*mistakes*’ ... there is *never* perfection and *always* perfection --- for each stitch (even the missed or tangled ones) is perfectly *what it is*. There can never be a ‘*mistake*’ or ‘*error*’, anything in need of ‘*repair*’. We remember this even as, time and again, we must undo our mistakes, untie our knots, learn from our errors, and repair what can be repaired.

Sewing this way, we learn to live this way, and to see all of reality this way. Moving forward in stillness, achieving in non-achieving. Thus, our “robe” is actually instructing us in the Buddha's teachings on reality, and as we learn to see our robe *as-it-is*, we appreciate how we can come to see all of reality *as-it-is*.

Nyoho-e.

As in our *Kinhin* (walking meditation), just focus on the stitch and step you are doing at that very moment. If you can approach sewing with the speed and attitude of *Kinhin*, making the Rakusu can be a most wonderful experience (thank you, Rowan, for reminding us of this).

Over coming days on our Forum, and in “*Sit-a-Long with Jundo*” talks, we will be looking at many of the writings of Master Dogen and others on the meaning of all this.

THE SEWING INSTRUCTIONS:

Please follow along with Rev. Taigu's recorded lessons (the links are on the forum). I believe his explanations so clear and complete, that if you just "**Sew-a-Long with Rev. Taigu**", you should be fine.

But, as an additional resource, if something on the video is unclear, you can also look at these pages from a wonderful manual on sewing the Nyoho-e Rakusu by Tomoe Katagiri Sensei (Dainin Katagiri Roshi's widow). It also contains some essays on the philosophy of the Rakusu, together with detailed drawings ... (45 PAGE!! - PDF FILE. It is probably not necessary to print all, and you can just print the pages you need from time to time)

<http://jundotreeleaf.googlepages.com/TreeleafRakusuInstructions-Katagiri.pdf>

HOWEVER, PLEASE BE AWARE THAT THE SIZES AND MEASUREMENTS THAT REV. TAIGU USES DO NOT FOLLOW EXACTLY THE SIZES IN THE KATAGIRI SENSEI BOOK! Some of the details are different, due to there being two different "schools" of Nyoho-e sewing. Thus, we strongly recommend that you try to work first with the instructions in Rev. Taigu's videos, and turn to the manual only if you need to check something that is still unclear. Follow Rev. Taigu's sizes. As well, if you have a question or something you do not understand **PLEASE POST IT ON THE SEWING "THREAD" THREAD**, and Rev. Taigu will try to answer soon.

<http://www.treeleaf.org/forum/viewforum.php?f=7>

OTHER TIPS:

Here are some other tips contributed by Rev. Taigu, our dear Rowan, and some other experienced sewers ... However, remember that *efficiency* and *short-cuts* are not always the point of what we are doing (which is often based on tradition and a philosophy of facing some obstacles). We have sometimes included time saving tips, sometimes chosen not to do so.

- Please do not purchase a kit with precut material (not available anyway for the style of *Nyoho-e*), and purchase and cut the material yourself.
- As to color: Please avoid bright primary colors (such as blue, yellow, red, white and pure black), and select 'muddy' colors such as dark brown or dark green (a nice Treeleaf color!), very dark blue or perhaps blue-ish black.
- Material: We can theoretically use virtually everything for material, such as silk, linen, artificial fabric or cotton. However, a plain shirt weight cotton (like that used for most men's "dress" shirts ... any fabric store will understand the meaning) is suggested. A fairly tight weave is good so your edges don't fray while sewing (so a thin "gauze" fabric should be avoided). Hemp, linen, silk are very beautiful but very tricky to sew. For example, most light-weight linen fabric is relatively loosely woven, and therefore a bit more difficult to work with (might fray more while you are sewing), so tightly woven cotton is advised. We use "shirt weight" because, at certain points of layering or folding several layers of fabric, something thicker may be difficult to handle. A plain-weave natural 100%

cotton is best, as it is possible to slightly melt a cotton/polyester blend when ironing. And cotton is natural!

- While it was traditional to use discarded fabric or re-dyed rags, you may purchase new fabric for your first Rakusu. Fabric scraps and odds & ends tend to fray and are hard to manage for beginners.
- One may use any normal “all purpose” sewing thread or even silk thread, but the color should only be either white (to stand out against the color of the fabric) or the same color as the fabric (to blend in). One or the other, not both. One spool will be plenty.
- Rev. Taigu will instruct you to add a white, cotton panel at the back of the Rakusu (where the instructions say the calligraphy should go). Here is an example:

http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3257/2681568116_435bccd2ef.jpg?v=0

Jundo will be mailing you a piece of silk, cut to size with calligraphy on it, to be sewn over that white panel. Rev. Taigu will show how and where in his videos. Jundo’s panel must be added before the remainder of the Rakusu is finished.

- The ‘**Ring**’: In keep with the traditional style of a *Nyoho-e* Rakusu, and for sake of simplicity, there will *–not–* be a ring. My apologies to all who obtained a ring. However, once you sew this first Rakusu, it is very easy to sew more ... and you can try a ring next time!
- To prepare your fabric before cutting and sewing: Wash it on hot and tumble dry or hang dry. If you don't have a washing machine, you can hand wash it. This removes the "sizing" that is in most fabrics (sizing is a light starch-like finish that keeps the fabric looking good on the bolt in the store). Then, iron it very flat and you are ready to draw out your pattern on the fabric (all the little and big rectangles that make a Rakusu). Often in sewing, one cuts out two layers of fabric at a time, but because the pieces of a Rakusu are so small and need to be exact, it is better to draw out every piece separately and do *one at a time*.
- Needles: Needles have all kinds of funny names like "sharps" or "darners". Just get the ones with the longish eye-holes (the ones with the round holes are not bad, but a little harder to thread. Good practice however!) Threading the needle may be the biggest challenge of all the work, and an excellent opportunity to just be present with it all! There are needle-threaders which are little metal items with a fine wire loop, you put the thread through the loop and push the loop through the eye of the needle. There is no particular recommended size for the needle, but any selection available at a fabric store will have a good selection and, tell them you are doing a little hand sewing on shirt cotton and they can advise you on the appropriate needle.

- As Rowan says, “*hand sewing is very easy (one little stitch after another) and 99% of how something looks is in the ironing*”. Have a good steam iron constantly at the ready. Ironing is something that is done before sewing, during sewing and after sewing. Ironing matters because it is what makes the piece look flat and smooth and finished, and can even correct some “mistakes”. (If, like most people, you are not on very intimate terms with an iron, Rowan suggests a little exercise: “Take an all-cotton shirt, wash it, hang it up to dry. When it is dry it will have many nice wrinkles and be a bit stiff. Then steam iron it, slowly and carefully, getting every little bit flat including the pesky little bits under and around the buttons. One note, sometimes I have seen people do this odd wiggly-fish maneuver with an iron and generally iron too fast. I think this comes from the movies or something. Ironing is done slowly and carefully, looking to see how it is doing as you go (it really does require a bit of attention). A very rare phenomena but worth mentioning. I have encountered fabrics that change color when ironed, they get darker, but when the fabric cools down it goes back to it's original color. The one problem that is a bit serious is if your iron sticks while you are ironing, this usually means that you are melting some polyester content in the fabric ... so we avoid polyester fabric. This is why I recommend cotton. It is good to try out ironing on a little extra piece of your Rakusu fabric just to make sure your iron temp is ok, but they all have marks to tell you how hot to use. Make sure the steam is happening by ironing on just the ironing board. If you don't have an ironing board, I have draped a towel over a board or junk table (do NOT do this on a good table, you will warp the finish”).
- Obtain a good, inexpensive pair of scissors (ordinary scissors are fine, but not scissors you have used to cut paper). Paper cutting scissors may not cut fabric well for some reason due to how the paper changes the blade. So try out your scissors now on some cloth so you are prepared if you need a new pair. Any cheap new pair of scissors at the sewing store should work well on fabric, and expensive scissors are not needed (unless you plan to sew lots in the future).
- Ruler: We will be using the metric systems (for yanks, that means that we will be cutting our rakusus in kilometers and liters. ☺ Really, guys, it is not that hard.) Rakusus are all about a lot of rectangles, so a 30 cm ruler is great, and perhaps a metre yardstick for the longest lines (note to yanks, an ordinary foot ruler and yardstick should also have metric measures on one side). The short ruler should best be see-through plastic. The flexible cloth measuring tapes you can get in fabric stores are not so good, because you want a crisp and very straight edge. Also, you may need something to make a 90 degree corner (an empty CD case should do nicely)
- Measurements & Cutting Fabric: As mentioned, the Katagiri Sensei book provides everything in inches. However, we will be using centimeters. So Rev. Taigu converted the figures in the book with an extra length for safety (if people are not so precise, the whole thing still works). **Thus, please cut the material following the Katagiri Sensei book instructions, but to the following measurements:**

In centimeters:

5 Cho of 11 by 16

5 Tan of 11 by 10
1 Maneki of 20 by 25
*2 Sao of 11 by 110 (the length of the 'sao' depends on
how tall the person is and how long he or
she wants the rakusu to be)*
1 En of 11 by 125
4 Joro of 4 by 4

- Straight pins - any standard straight pins from a fabric or drug store/chemist.
- Pencil: Avoid the marking pens you get at fabric stores because the line is too thick (unless a fabric marking pencils which sharpens to a nice point and is "water-soluble"). You will do fine with an ordinary #2 graphite pencil, sharpened to make a nice crisp line. With the pencil, you will draw the required seam lines. You can make nice straight lines or, if you wish, you can, instead of drawing a solid line for your sewing line, make a line of dots at the required intervals so that it is easier to make even stitches. Then you can pin the pieces you are sewing together.
- Threading the needle: Cut thread at an angle (this makes a tiny point that is easier to get through the eye of the needle), then it is traditional to slightly lick the thread to keep the the point of the thread from fraying when you thread it. This may actually be the most taxing part of the whole project!
- Making a knot: We do not use a "double" thread (in a "double" thread, one long piece goes through the needle, the needle comes to rest in the middle of the thread, and we knot the resulting ends together). Instead, we use a nice long "single" thread, knotted on one end. Just a regular 'ol knot, tied a few times, is fine.
- Ironing – again: After you sew two pieces together, you should iron the seam flat. Usually we iron ever time we finish a seam.
- Knot at the end of a seam: Make a tiny stitch in place, bring your needle through the loop of the thread, pull tight. Repeat and cut off leaving **a bit of thread sticking out of the fabric**. Remember, when we work on the central part of the rakusu, knots may show. As soon as we get to the frame, they should be hidden in the fabric. On the finished rakusu, no knots should show. Hopefully, all this is shown and made clear in the videos.
- It is okay to ask experienced sewers in your family for guidance and minor help, so long as you do not ask them to do any of the work for you.
- It is Rev. Taigu's opinion that a Rakusu can be completed in about 40 to 70 hours. That is a few days for the real speedies (although rushing is not recommended at all), a couple of months for slow-pokes (also not recommended), but should take a few weeks at an easy pace for most folks.

- Please read this article on Sewing the Buddha's Robe from the last Dharma Heir of Kodo Sawaki Roshi, still alive and living in Japan ...

<http://www.zen-road.org/teachings/english/kojun-kishigami-osho-en/wrapped-in-buddhas-robe/>

- Make mistakes ... work with sometime moments of frustration. **THAT'S A KEY POINT OF IT ALL!** Patience is required and people should take their time. During the process of sewing, one can go through different emotional turmoils which are part and parcel of the journey. Sewing is a mirror and, like zazen, offers plenty of space to watch and enjoy the show and the mental game. Breathing is important, because people tend to “hold their breath” at points because of the precision involved. If they wish, they could sing "I take refuge in the Buddha" or "*Namue kie Butsu*" with each stitch ... but it is certainly not necessary.

Always remember that sewing a Rakusu is not a matter of beauty, and more the mindful process of “*just sewing*” ...

STITCH BY STITCH!