Traditionally, new monks and nuns walked naked to the town dump, pulled out scraps of cloth, bleached them, dyed them with natural dyes, and then sewed them together to make robes. The robe became home. (The Practice of Perfection)

This IS NOT A BOOK about perfection so much as it is about practice, about clothing yourself and being at home. Robert Aitken Roshi weaves together the declarations of the Ten Paramitas with careful explanations, quotes, applications, questions and answers--all in a dialogue of learning rather than a lecture or a sermon from on high.

Aitken, author of Taking the Path of Zen and Mind of Clover (both North Point), and co-founder with his wife Anne of the Diamond Sangha Center in Hawaii, has always been a humble and practical teacher, and the cloth he sews here is hardy and strong.

His tone is conversational and direct, his style mindful, reflective, often poetic, as in the chapter on Paramita Eight--Aspiration--where he explains the interplay of “vows” and “experience”:

Your vows direct you to the deepest experience of the real world--the world of inter-being. So do bells, clappers, birdsong, and even the helicopter rattling overhead. So do mountains and clouds and poinciana trees. So does the whiff of incense or the touch of your clothing to your skin when the wind blows. These experiences can reveal inter-being directly, or they can remind you of your vows--and your vows in turn can help you to be open to experience.

Typically Aitken follows this with a variety of quotes and koans from Zen masters Dogen, Chao-chou, and Shakyamuni, and poets Basho, Hakuin, Ikkyu, and even Walt Whitman and Gary Snyder. His goal is to connect with the long history of practicing the Zen way by personalizing the teachings and tying them to social action. In many ways this book is the record of his own fifty years of Western practice.

The Practice of Perfection moves at an easy pace, in twenty-page chapters suitable for daily lessons. Each is focused on one of the Ten Paramitas: Giving (Dana), Morality (Shila), Forbearance (Kshanti), Zeal (Virya), Settled, Focused Meditation (Zazen), Compassion (Upaya), Aspiration (Pranidhana), Spiritual Strength (Bala), and Knowledge (Jnana). As he explains, “Each step is perfection itself, but each gives notice of a different aspect of perfection.” One must not get consumed with attaining perfection, he warns, but practice well as a part of the perfection that unites us.

He advises those practicing lay Zen or seeking to become ordained monks and nuns to find a good teacher. Otherwise, “You are left thinking zazen is itself enlightenment, not realizing that you aren’t doing zazen. There are depths beyond depths. With a true teacher you can follow the exacting path that leads on and on.”

Aitken feels that eventually we come to accept our life and all in it (including memories, desires, and failures) as part of a long practice—everything is teaching.

In “Aspiration” he clarifies the central movement of practice: “We motivate ourselves with our vows to move from the singular to the plural, to abandon indulgence in the sole self and divert energy to the community. Zazen is the ground for this transformation; daily life is its garden. We practice it together.” Aware that we often miss these essential and simple truths when stated, Aitken illustrates them, ties them to his practice, and then allows half of each chapter for dialogue through the “Questions and Responses” section. The book itself works into a pattern, a rhythm of practice, revealing the interdependence of all of the “Paramitas,” the net of meaning. Ultimately Aitken proves himself a wise teacher, one who listens well and values silence. Standing near, he allows his readers to make their own robes.

In Aitken’s new Original Dwelling Place: Zen Buddhist Essays we have a diverse collection of twenty-four selected prefaces, biographical
introductions, talks, and essays on Zen Buddhist figures and topics: a lifetime of reflection and teaching. It never leaves the core task, however--"to take up Buddhism as a religion of infinite compassion"--especially when it is discussing "The Experience of Emptiness: Use and Misuse":

Some students understand this empty nature conceptually, and risk getting stuck in an undifferentiated place where correct and incorrect are the same, where male and female are the same--where all configurations disappear into a kind of pudding. The great teachers of the past addressed this risk directly:

The venerable Yen-yang asked Chao-chou, "When one has brought not a single thing, what then?"

Chao-chou said, "Put it down."

When you cling to nothing as something, then you yourself are not truly empty, and the emptiness you cherish is no more than an idea. With this notion of emptiness, you can be persuaded that the homeless are an illusion, the rain forests are not being destroyed, there are no traditional peoples who are dying out, there is no one freezing or starving or dying from shrapnel in the former Yugoslavia. When you run over a child with your car, there is no child, after all. Put down that "not a single thing" or your successors will use it to enhance and support brutality and imperialism.

The book begins appropriately with a section of "Ancestors," portraits of those persons who helped bring Zen to the West. Foremost here are the persons who most influenced Aitken's own practice, beginning with Zen monk Nyogen Senzaki, founder of the San Francisco Zen Center in 1928. In 1947 Aitken began working with this humble maverick who taught chiefly through his actions and example. Next came the reluctant Soen Roshi whom he met in Japan in the 1940s while working on a study of haiku. He compares Soen Roshi with the Native American Black Elk for his emphasis on vision and pageant. Though Soen Roshi refused to take on Aitken as a disciple, he did counsel him in the Way: "When you sweep the garden, you are sweeping your mind." This Zen master did not want to accept a mission in America, and so sent Eido Shimano in his stead, a mistake he refused to admit even when Shimano became embroiled in troubles on both coasts for his sexual harassment. Aitken then turns to his old ally R. H. Blyth, citing his book Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics as his "first book," "in the way Walden was the 'first book' for some of my friends." Aitken came upon the book while in a Japanese civilian internment camp during World War II. It was there in 1944 that he also came upon the book's author, for Blyth himself was interned at the camp in Kobe, where Aitken was later transferred. Also a reluctant teacher, Blyth was uncomfortable with young Aitken's adulation, but comfortable with his friendship. The two men became friends and co-teachers. One must imagine their wonderful conversations over haiku and Zen. Of Blyth's personal limitations--his assertion of Zen prowess beyond his scope as well as his poor treatment of women--Aitken confides, "I accept these flaws as I accept the flaws in my own father .... His words rise in my mind as I speak to my own students, and his face still appears in my dreams."

The final two portraits are of admired scholars and translators of Zen writing: D. T. Suzuki and Dwight Goddard. Aitken's brief study with Suzuki revealed to him how open and engaged the man was with a firm commitment to world peace. Aitken does a nice job of sketching in the details of Goddard's life, showing him as an early, almost forgotten Zen scholar, whose collection of Buddhist writings in his A Buddhist Bible proved essential in bringing the Way to the West. He cites, for example, its impact on Jack Kerouac as one of his "first books," one Kerouac drew from in his poetry, Zen writing, and novel The Dharma Bums. Finally Aitken links himself to Goddard "as a fellow eccentric and fellow late bloomer... devoted to religious understanding." This seems the intent of the whole "Ancestors" section: to pay tribute and highlight a personal lineage. The remaining four sections of Original Dwelling Place cover "The Classical Discourse." "Practice," "Ethics and Revolution," and "Taking Pleasure in the Dharma." Though not a tightly organized book, and containing some overlap, it embraces an open directness that is rewarding. Aitken addresses the deepest levels of Zen realization as well as problems such as sexual abuse within Buddhist communities. His work is always carefully researched, deeply assimilated, and readily applied. In "Classical Discourses" he presents a vital portrait of Kanzeon, the Goddess of Mercy, and views the essential teaching of the Brahma Viharas as this: "A step beyond kindliness, compassion is the personal experience and practice of interbeing. We live our short lives not merely in the interdependence but as a single great organism of many dynamic elements. What happens to you happens to me; what happens to me happens to you--at the same moment with the same intensity."
In the "Practice" section he acknowledges Dogen Zenji as his chief mentor, describing a method of moving "freely from the acceptance of a particular mode as complete in itself to an acknowledgment of its complementarity with others, to a presentation of its unity with all things--and back again"--Aitken's own method practiced here. And though Dogen Zenji often "wrote at the outermost edge of human communication," Aitken serves well as a Western translator of the heart of Buddhism.

His final sections on "Ethics and Revolution" and "Taking Pleasure in the Dharma" contribute to the whole dialogue on engaged Buddhism, yet maintain the necessity of keeping the practice light. His most frequent quote is from the Quaker pacifist A. J. Muste ("There is no way to peace; peace is the way"), which Aitken enlarges to: "There is no way to a just society; our just societies are the way." To accomplish this, he realizes, one must awaken to our seeds of change: "In the world of play, a druggist's apprentice becomes a knight, a child becomes a father, a dog becomes a baby, and the insurance agent, throwing off his worries about declining sales, transforms himself into a prince and seduces his tired wife and the mother of his brood, who in turn becomes a ravishing, masked beauty at the mummer's ball."

Now in his late seventies, Robert Aitken confirms in his practice and his words that Buddhism is a transforming practice. Larry Smith is a professor of humanities at Firelands College in Huron, Ohio. He is also a poet and novelist, and is completing a biography of American author and artist Kenneth Patchen.