



Use of the Stick: Manjusri's Life-Giving Sword

At the Rochester Zen Center, as well as at many Zen temples in Japan and China, few tools of sesshin are more helpful than the *kyosaku*, or encouragement stick. As an aid to concentration it was widely used in China long before Zen was transplanted from there to Japan, and it may go back even further. As mentioned in *The Three Pillars of Zen*, it is “probably a hardier descendant of a small rod used even in the Buddha’s day to awaken dozing monks, and constructed so as to whistle when shaken beside the ears.”

Books that indiscriminately criticize the use of the stick as punitive – usually written by authors with no real experience in Zen training – reveal a lack of understanding of the spirit in which it is used. That spirit is called up most forcefully in sesshin, which involves not only ten or more hours of daily sitting but an extraordinary intensification of effort. Such sitting generates *yoriki*, the psychic energy that grows out of intense mental absorption. Strenuous sitting builds *yoriki* by focusing and conserving energies that would otherwise be dispersed through aimless thinking. Still, as with any other human effort, sitting cannot be sustained at peak intensity, and periods of drowsiness and mental stagnation are inevitable. This is where the stick comes in, one of our chief allies in the battle against “the demon of sleep,” as Zen master Hakuin called it. The specific points on the shoulders where we are struck are on an acupuncture meridian connected to the lower belly (*hara* or *tanden* in Japanese), which when stimulated liberates psychic energy.

Our policy in sesshin is that no one is to ask for the stick; it is used only at the discretion of the monitors, who try to apply it with the force, tempo and frequency best suited to each individual. When we switched to this practice after years in which participants had to request the stick (with hands raised palm-to-palm) every time they wanted it, sesshins acquired a whole new degree of power. The new policy eliminated the need to consider, every time the monitors came around with the stick, “Should I ask for it or not?” This decision easily trips an upsurge of self-referential thoughts, such as what requesting it (or not) says about us, that interferes with pure absorption in the breath or koan. Once participants were relieved of the burden of choosing, and of the self-concerns involved in it, everything became simpler for them. They could leave the decision-making to the monitors and focus on the single matter before them. By relinquishing control, they could open themselves to a power greater than themselves. Sitter, monitor, and stick were working together as one.

Zen speaks of “the hen tapping from the outside while the chick pecks from the inside.” Though this generally refers to the teacher-student dynamic, it may also be seen as the collaboration that occurs between monitor and sitter. At best, the monitor and sitter are in a kind of communion in which each responds to the other’s exertions. It is a joint effort

with the mutual respect and feelings of intimacy that grow out of their shared purpose. The openness implicit in the rows of backs turned outward inspires in the monitors a sense of sharing in a sacred trust. Sitters who can respond to the stick with the same trust can find themselves with a heightened charge in penetrating “Dharma gates beyond measure.”

In the highly structured setting of sesshin, the stick functions as a spark that can ignite participants’ deepest aspirations. The following excerpt from a kensho account that appears in *Zen: Merging of East and West* reveals how important even the sound of the stick can be in nudging the mind beyond itself:

“The kyosaku whacked me whenever it whacked anyone in the zendo and the bells and wind and cicadas were all in my own mind and Mu and Mu and I would not stop. One final whack in some part of my mind across the room on someone else’s shoulders brought finality and I was wrenched into a black, black ego-shattering paroxysm of Mu, Mu, Mu. And it happened a second time and I did not yield to the temptation to rest in anything called ‘glorious’ or ‘I am there’ I saw that nothing in the universe existed that could separate me from the totality of deathless being with which I now knew mySelf to be one!”

To better appreciate the role of the stick in sesshin, we can look to the figures on the altar. In sesshin the Buddha figure, which represents our intrinsically enlightened Mind, takes a secondary position, upstaged by Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom. It is Manjusri, engaged in the ceaseless struggle to vanquish the forces of delusion, who from his pedestal temporarily installed at the front of the altar presides over sesshin. His vow is, “All beings, without number, I vow to liberate,” and not until that mission is finally achieved will he rest. If the Buddha represents ultimate freedom – freedom from which we are separated only by our wrong thinking – Manjusri, in his sword-wielding pose, may be seen as representative of the courage and exertion required to realize that freedom.

Manjusri’s preeminence during sesshin reminds participants of the numberless dharma gates still standing before them even as it reminds them that they have the resources needed to pass through those gates. Manjusri warns us not to fall into “buji Zen,” the fatal error of assuring ourselves that since we are all intrinsically buddhas – enlightened ones – there is nothing to strive for. With the Buddha figure in the background during sesshin, she is emphasizing that it is no time to sit back and bask in our inner light of original buddhahood. To be sure, “from the beginning all beings are Buddha,” as Zen master Hakuin declares in his “Chant in Praise of Zazen,” but until we experientially realize this truth, it is not real. It is not true.

Beginners often think that the energy transfusion that comes from the stick is primarily meant to lift sitters out of drowsiness. But the stick is used on most people to neutralize a far more intractable obstacle: thoughts. Besides the run-of-the-mill random thoughts that flit in and out of the mind so much of the time, there are stubborn conceptual illusions to

contend with. One of the most vexing of these, which crops up most often late in sesshin, is the sense of being increasingly divided within oneself between subject and object, observer and observed. Sometimes this comes with a voice-over – the kibitzing mind that won't be silenced. We may also come to feel as though caught in a gridlock of thoughts, in which it seems impossible to either advance or retreat. A brisk strike of the stick can give us the burst of energy needed to break out of such mental impasses. In this sense the stick becomes Manjusri's own sword, a sword which when wielded by the monitors nominally can do much to sunder the bonds that obstruct the sitter. Once delusive thoughts have settled, the transcendental wisdom with which we are all endowed, represented by Manjusri, stands revealed. Manjusri in the form of monitor helps liberate the Manjusri in each of us.

In addition to persistent thoughts, almost any form of makyo is more likely to break up through the compassionate use of the stick: fantasies, illusory sensations, hallucinations, and obstructive psychological states. By focusing the power of mind the stick may, for example, enable us to see the insubstantiality of fear, and to work through even lifelong fears.

But what about when the stick itself is the object of fear? If our aversion to the stick is fairly mild (and it does take most of us a little time to learn to fully relax and appreciate it), just continuing to work with it usually leads us to discover its benefits. But there are also those for whom the stick is disturbing, such as when it elicits memories of childhood physical abuse. Even these people can overcome their negative associations with the stick, but it is sometimes better that they not be struck. Participants are told in sesshin (the only time the stick is used without the sitter asking for it) to write a note to the monitors if any problems develop with the stick; they may either decline to be struck altogether or ask that the stick be used much less. Mutual trust between monitor and sitter is absolutely essential in order for the stick to be truly helpful.

Persistent fear of the stick is not the only reason to recommend against it. There are men and women of such finely-tuned psyches that to use the stick on them would be more of a hindrance than a help. Pregnant women are generally not hit (or hit only very lightly), as we don't really know how it might affect the fetus. Then there are those rare individuals who simply don't need the stick. The Buddha is reported to have said, "A high-class horse moves at even the shadow of the whip," and some such horses are still around. But how many? Some people are able to mobilize their inner resources to sit with great energy without the stick, and a few of them are able to use that energy to come to awakening. But energy is a relative thing, and the stick will boost the efforts of nearly every one of us. At least until their initial breakthrough, average practitioners of Zen, like average horses, need all the help they can get.

In spite of the power of the stick and its long pedigree in Zen, it is probably the most misunderstood feature of traditional Zen training. Most of us, as we grow up, naturally tend to regard being struck with a stick as punishment; in most cases, probably, it was. But not in Zen. (Actually, I have heard reports of the misuse of the stick at some Japanese monasteries where monitoring duties are rotated among all the monks; it is sometimes

used there by bad monks to settle scores. But no such abuses occur, to my knowledge, in the Rochester Zen Center lineage, where only a handful of seasoned practitioners are allowed to use the stick.)

The stick may be applied to rouse a sleepy sitter, enliven a weary one, or spur on one who is striving hard, but under no circumstances is it used as punishment or out of any sense of ill will. Every strike of the stick is an affirmation of faith in the sitter. Each “Whack, whack! Whack, whack!” may be heard as, “The energy of the whole universe is yours! You can go further, deeper! You, too, can realize your innate perfection!”

The stick, then, is nothing less than a means of focusing the energy and force of the monitors and the sesshin as a whole and transferring it to each sitter. Seen this way, the use of the stick is an act of true compassion. Most monitors, it seems, would welcome the chance to sit through full rounds of zazen without having to get up to use the stick (and the irony is not lost on them that it wasn't until they reached this level of ease while sitting that they were assigned monitoring duties). Sesshin participants turn a corner in their practice when they realize what a service the monitors are providing, and that, along with their teacher, they are their closest allies.

It must never be forgotten that the monitors were once at the other end of the stick. Most of them spent years there, learning, through direct experience, that the stick is first and last an instrument of compassion. They know, as well as anyone can, the great value of the stick when it is accepted openly and trustingly, without resistance. And this experience of theirs gives rise to deep gratitude – gratitude not only to the monitors who actually encouraged them with it, but to their teacher and all of the teachers and masters before him who included the stick in their training methods as a means of liberating human beings and preserving the strength and vigor of the Zen sect.

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