

(This was a requested piece about an experience of Transmission written and published on BeliefNet.org)

My first time to sit Zazen was at Tassajara Mountain Monastery shortly after Suzuki Roshi died. David Chadwick gave zazen instruction, and although I was able to sit quite well, I had definite fear after seeing kyosaku, the discipline stick. At zazen the next morning, the sound of kyosaku pierced the glorious spring air. Quiet footsteps roamed the zendo until suddenly there was a swish, a blood-piercing CRACK, and a swish. Some incredible encounter seemed to be happening in various pockets around the room. I could not imagine what would cause someone to place him or herself in such a vulnerable circumstance. And yet, here I was on the same kind of cushion except it was announced that new people would not be hit. I trusted them to keep their promise.

The kyosaku, or keisaku, is a long heavy stick that is used to strike people on the soft muscle of the shoulders to encourage them toward awakening. It represents the sword of wisdom and the means to cut through delusion. When people sit a very long time, the muscles become tired. A strike with kyosaku can relax and revive the muscles that are fundamental to holding the mudra and posture of awareness. It is never a punishment; rather it is that which promotes the practice-experience of awakening.

Of course, I was to learn this later. To be in the presence of the sound of kyosaku for the first time caused me to doubt the way of Zazen. And this practice was, for me, the final place. My eggs were all in one basket. If I did not find answers here, there would be no other possibility. I had run out of avenues. I wanted to know what it meant to pass through the gate. If Zen had been going on for eons, and others - thousands of nuns and monks and laypeople, matriarchs, patriarchs named and unnamed - had come through this gate, what did they know? What did they experience?

Shortly after, I met my first teacher, Kobun C. Otagawa Roshi who was teaching at Haiku Zendo. I told him immediately that the sound of kyosaku had distressed me. I said that I thought the only way to overcome the fear was to experience kyosaku directly. I trusted he would not cause me injury. Would he please show me how kyosaku felt? He agreed and said he would show me during zazen.

Each fiber of my body sat with a vital, taut alertness. Three bells rang to begin the period of zazen and there was no leaving then, just a waiting for the particular moment. Time passed and then a small swish of garment as Roshi got up from his cushion and moved agonizingly slowly around the

zendo and then stood directly behind me. I felt him completely present at my back and I waited for the strike. And I waited. And waited. Waited.

Slowly in the silence of the empty no-striking kyosaku, his teaching washed through me, mind-to-mind transmission from teacher to student, the circle of lineage balanced on the shoulders in the immediate wisdom of Manjusuri Bodhisattva. Opening with the light of his teaching. Here without words the mind-to-mind transmission erased all fear and the gate fell away. Eye-to-eye knowing confirmed the emptiness and the abiding presence of the meaning of kyosaku in all phenomenon. Transmission in this final place. No basket. No eggs.