

Concerning the Correct Use of the Sword of Buddha's Wisdom.

Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett

[The Sword of Buddha's Wisdom or "awakening stick" is a flat wooden stick carried during meditation periods in some meditation halls. Because it has been widely misunderstood and misused in both the East and the West, the following article has been written.]

If people, when meditating, have correctly set up the back-flowing method of breathing,¹ they may find that their shoulders have become extraordinarily tense. This is because correct breathing brings energy up the back of the body and down the front of the body and, if the person has so-called 'mental blocks,' tension develops around the shoulders. The energy that correct breathing circulates around the body gets trapped in the shoulder blades which seem to be the place where one "holds on," as it were, to private opinions, emotions, ideas, concepts, fears, worries, facades, etc. For a long time I could not understand, when in the East, why the Sword of Buddha's Wisdom was regarded as a 'massage stick'; but remember that the purpose of massage is to relieve tensions. If the awakening stick is used correctly to relieve the tensions that result from a person's energy in this area being blocked and unable to pass freely up the spine, over the head and down the sternum then it is of great value. It can relieve these blocks, at least temporarily and sometimes permanently, so that the energy may pass freely and the meditation may be full and adequate.

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The awakening stick, like acupuncture and moxa burning,² acts as a catalyst for the removal of tensions at a time when someone least needs tension for there is no way in which a person can meditate adequately unless the energy can pass freely throughout his body. Man is body and mind and the purpose of meditation is the harmonisation of body and mind. If there is tension then the vital energy cannot move freely and the peace and beauty of true meditation cannot be known.

The Sword of Buddha's Wisdom should never be used to punish; it should never be used indiscriminately because it is thought of as something that is 'traditional'. It has a specific function and a specific purpose which I have described herein; any other use of it is a prostitution. When people feel that their shoulders are tense, as do many executives and others, they should consider well what is going on in their bodies for this is a sign that they are becoming more and more tense as a result of stress and strain and, therefore, need meditation far more than perhaps they realise. The awakening stick can relieve these tensions if they block the meditation but it can do nothing more. He who experiences pleasure from the awakening stick is wrong; he who experiences pain is wrong....

In the East it is used, in addition to the above occasions, to help a trainee to have the courage to become the "One Who leaps beyond all fear" (see *The Litany of the Great Compassionate One*³) by transcending the opposites. However, few indeed are there who know how to use it in this way.

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Notes.

1. See Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett's detailed explanation of correct breathing during seated meditation in the article entitled "Commentary on Dogen's *Rules for Meditation*."
2. The old Chinese and Japanese practice of applying heat to relieve tense muscles.
3. *The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity*, comp. Rev. Master P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, M.O.B.C., 2nd ed. rev. (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1990), pp. 78–79.