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Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases for Kōan Practice

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Review of *Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases for Kōan Practice*

Jiang Wu*

Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases for Kōan Practice.

Compiled, translated, and annotated by Victor Sōgen Hori.

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0-8248-2284-6 (cloth)

Contemporary Rinzai Zen practice is characterized by *kōan* study, which originated in Song China. Little is known, however, of the use of so-called capping phrases (*jakugo* or *agyo*)—phrases used to induce an enlightenment experience within a rigorous curriculum of *kōan* studies. Since the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Japanese Zen monks have collected many such phrases and compiled them into various notebooks to aid students searching for appropriate capping phrases in response to their master's questions. Such phrase books remain popular in Rinzai training and have been frequently updated.

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Victor Sōgen Hori's *Zen Sand* is a recent attempt to introduce the contemporary Japanese Rinzai *kōan* tradition to a Western audience. In this monumental work, Hori creates the most comprehensive handbook of capping phrases existent in English. Not only does he provide elegant translations for hundreds of phrases, he also offers a thorough introduction to the history of the *kōan* tradition. In addition, he proposes a new hypothesis about the origins of *kōan* practice in China. To give Hori's work a fair evaluation, I will examine three aspects of *Zen Sand*: first, the introductory material that focuses on historical issues surrounding *kōan* practice; second, the translations; third, the potential uses of this handbook in both academia and faith communities.

Hori begins his project with a lengthy introduction, which includes six sections. Topics range from the discussion of the nature of capping phrases to the procedure and history of the practice. No doubt, this part provides much needed information for students who are not familiar with the tradition. My impression is that Hori actually creates two layers of discourse: one a normative definition of the nature of capping phrases based on his personal experience as a Zen monk; the other an academic discussion that offers insights about the origin of *kōan* practice.

From the perspective of a Zen practitioner who studied in Rinzai monasteries for many years, Hori emphasizes the religious nature of this practice. As he claims, "Koan is not a text to be studied for its meaning as one would study an essay or a poem, but rather an existential explosive device with language merely serving as the fuse." (p. 8) In so doing, he opposes a scholarly opinion that regards *kōan* as a kind of "scriptural exegesis." (According to Hori, Robert Sharf represents this view in particular.) In addition, for Hori, to argue that a religious practice like *kōan* study was manufactured or manipulated for ideological purposes does not negate the fact that deep personal experience in the practice determines its meaning. Such kind of private experience defies linguistic expression. (This is why this book is titled *Zen Sand*, meaning that the ineffable truth of Zen has to be "mixed with the sand of language.") In the first section, Hori

largely engages in refuting this kind of scholarly argument. He also explains the five-fold division of *kōan* practice in contemporary Rinzai monasteries, which follow either Inzan Ien's or Takujū Kosen's tradition. (see pp. 16-30)

The rest of the introduction offers a much more rigorous academic analysis. As Hori correctly points out, *kōan* practice as it is today contains a significant component of literary study based on Chinese cultural heritage. Capping phrases are largely gleaned from various Chinese literary classics, Buddhist scriptures, or even colloquial expressions such as street songs (occasionally Japanese verses). To ensure understanding of an assigned *kōan*, students are often required to compose "written analysis" (*kakiwake*) or "written rationale" to expound the meaning of the *kōan*. In addition, a student should compose the so-called "deft play" (*nenrō*) in short verses to demonstrate that he is capable of handling the *kōan* "playfully." In this sense, *kōan* practice is more like a rigorous curriculum of Chinese literary study. Obviously, it behooves us to explain such an intensive concentration on literary skills in *kōan* practice. Up to now, scholars have not yet figured out the historical specifics of how this literary tradition was brought into Zen training.

Here Hori offers a seminal hypothesis that merits further exploration from the perspective of Chinese literature. He notices that *kōan* practice shares a great deal of family resemblance with certain Chinese literary games, which involve elements such as competition, spontaneity, and even mind-to-mind transmission. All these elements, according to Hori, can be found in *kōan* practice. For example, in a typical game, the first player composes the first line or simply singles out a line from a famous poem. The second player is required to come up with the second line with the same rhythm and a parallel structure. A successful couplet or poem generated in such a game must not only follow the strict structural rules of poetry-making, the imagery or deeper meaning of each line must also form a unity and correspond to the others perfectly. In *kōan* practice, similar characteristics can be identified.

The crucial link Hori considers is the analogical thinking prevalent in Chinese literature. In a similar way, Zen *kōan* use particular allusions to draw analogies with ultimate Zen teachings. To solve a *kōan*, a student should be able to identify the analogy contained in the *kōan*. Of course, for Hori, to make the *kōan* intelligible by analogy is not the ultimate understanding because as a religious practice, the awakening experience must be involved.

In sum, Hori does an admirable job introducing readers to the practice of capping phrases. While Hori's personal experience as a Zen monk adds a special dimension to the subject, it does feel at times as though the two layers of discourse do not merge very well. For instance, while emphasizing the religious nature of *kōan* practice, Hori appears to undermine this assertion when he later hypothesizes on the connection between capping phrases and literary games giving readers an impression that *kōan* practice is more secular than otherwise.

Let us now turn to the section that forms the bulk of this book, the translations. Before Hori, there have been sporadic efforts to translate these capping phrases, for instance, Ruth Fuller Sasaki's *Zen Dust* (210 phrases), Shigematsu Sōku's *A Zen Forest* (1,234 verses), and Robert E. Lewis's *The Book of the Zen Grove* (631 verses). Hori's translation, while assimilating the merits of the previous translations, definitely surpasses the previous efforts in many ways. First, the scope of the selection is amazingly large. Based on the collections of capping phrases contained in two modern Japanese editions: Shibayama Zenkei's *Zenrin Kushū* and Tsuchiya Etsudō's *Shinsan zengoshū*, Hori translates a total of 4,022 phrases—making this work by far and away the most comprehensive capping phrase collection in English. Second, the arrangement and the format make for easy access. Following traditional phrase books in Japanese, all phrases are arranged according to the number sequence of Chinese characters. Moreover, each entry has been given an identification number for easy search. Both Chinese characters and Japanese readings are provided and followed by English translations. Special terms appearing in the glossary are marked. (The glossary contains useful

explanations of Chinese allusions and people's names.) Each entry is also cross-referenced with similar ones in popular Japanese phrase books and dictionaries. The author has done his best to help readers overcome the language barrier while providing adequate references for scholars and advanced students. Third, the quality of Hori's translation makes the book a joyful reading. Hori's translations are thoughtful, straightforward, and elegant.

Finally, I would like to briefly discuss the potential use of *Zen Sand* in Buddhist communities and the academic world. Obviously, as a Zen practitioner, Hori intends his book to be helpful in spiritual exercise. Although I may not be the right person to evaluate its potential for use in Zen meditation halls in America, I do have some reservations due to the fact that, as Hori hints, the use of capping phrases has been deeply influenced by Chinese literary tradition. The cultural barrier between China and Japan in the early centuries was already huge. This new translation into English is thus a third-hand cultural repackaging. Having said that, its actual use in faith communities awaits further study. For those in academia, this book is definitely the most important English-language work on the history of capping phrases and contemporary Rinzai practice. It is also useful in that it allows students to acquaint themselves with numerous Chinese allusions and classical stories. Even for general readers, this book offers unique opportunities to ruminate on each beautiful phrase, especially while sipping a cup of green tea.