

REVIEWS



Victor Sōgen Hori, *Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases for Kōan Practice*

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003. xiv + 764 pp. \$37.00 cloth, ISBN 0-8248-2284-6.

THE OFTEN-CITED dictum that Zen “does not rely on words or letters” has given rise to a misleading impression held by many that this Buddhist school of meditative practice takes an anti-intellectual posture in its approach to reality. The inscrutable or seemingly “nonsensical” character of verbal expressions or exchanges between master and disciple as depicted in Zen kōans contributes to the notion that Zen pertains to a realm of the “irrational.”

There is a corollary notion that Zen has to do with some kind of “pure experience,” that is, a direct, unmediated kind of apprehension devoid of intellectual or conceptual content. Sometimes taken synonymously with “mystical consciousness,” this notion of “pure experience” has been rendered problematic in academic discourse, notably since Steven Katz published his landmark article, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” in a collection he himself edited, entitled *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (1978).

Victor Sōgen Hori’s *Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases for Kōan Practice* gives us not only a well-documented and meticulously researched, comprehensive source-book of Zen phrases in English translation, for use by practitioners and scholars alike. It also succeeds superbly in setting the record straight and clarifies some widespread but misguided notions about Zen, as cited above.

In 1966 Miura Isshū and Ruth Fuller Sasaki published *Zen Dust: The History of the Kōan and Kōan Study in Rinzai (Lin-chi) Zen*, giving Western readers a systematic view of the Zen kōan system and how it functions within a monastic framework in the Rinzai school. *Zen Dust* included a section of translations of 210 verses selected by Miura Rōshi from the *Zenrin kushū* [Zen phrase anthology], a collection consulted by Rinzai Zen students on a regular basis to find a word or saying for presentation to the teacher in one-to-one interview, to demonstrate one’s grasp of a particular kōan at hand.

Hori’s *Zen Sand* goes on to complete what *Zen Dust* began, and offers an English translation of Zen phrases and verses contained in two collections most commonly used by kōan students in Japan. These are the *Zenrin kushū* 禪林句集 (with 2,646 phrases) compiled and annotated by Shibayama Zenkei 柴山全慶 (Kyoto: Kichūdo 1972), and the *Shinsan Zengoshū* 新纂禪語集 [A new compilation of the Zen phrase

collection] (with 3,040 phrases) by Tsuchiya Estudo 土屋悦堂 (Kyoto: Kichūdo 1973), for a combined total (with cross-references for duplications) of 4,022 entries.

In her foreword to *Zen Dust*, Ruth Fuller Sasaki relates how the title of the volume was chosen by Miura Rōshi, with the underlying emphasis that “all words about Zen being but dust to be gotten rid of, or, from a deeper standpoint, having no real existence at all” (xiv). This comment, outwardly denigrating or belittling the very effort in assembling words and letters to compose a volume such as *Zen Dust*, stands solidly within a tradition that proclaims Zen as “not relying on words or letters.” An astute reader will not miss the irony, as the book itself takes note of the arduous process involved in mastering the right words to give precise expression to the nuances of the Zen experience, as embodied in kōan practice.

Zen Sand is inspired by one of the verses included in the collection. “It’s gold—but to sell it you mix it with sand” (263). In short, “awakening itself is pure gold, undefiled by language... (and yet,) to be conveyed to others, it has to be mixed with the sand of language” (ix).

This prefatory remark by the author referring to something “undefiled by language” may already raise a red flag for those who have taken a particular stand siding with Katz, Wayne Proudfoot (*Religious Experience*, 1985), and others, in the debate regarding “pure experience.” Holding on to an epistemological framework that discounts such a notion as problematic, some may be led to early dismissal of *Zen Sand*, and with that, the entire religious world it represents. Hori’s introductory section, taking up the first hundred pages of a volume that approaches eight hundred, sets the questions and objections of such readers in the foreground, and addresses these in a straightforward manner, as he provides a very readable insider’s account of presuppositions and processes involved in Zen kōan practice. If the bulk of the volume listing and annotating 4,022 Zen phrases is about “sand,” this introductory section is nothing less than gold.

Hori, having just completed a PhD in Western philosophy from Stanford in 1976, sought ordination as a Rinzai Zen monk that same year, and traversed the rigorous path of kōan practice with noted Japanese Rinzai masters (individually named in his preface) over many years. Having returned to academic life in 1990, he is currently professor of Japanese religions at McGill University. Combining his first-hand experience of monastic training and kōan practice on the one hand with solid academic credentials on the other, he is uniquely equipped to offer to the world this monumental volume that will be among the handful to take along in case one’s house catches fire.

Hori reaffirms the traditional stance that “Zen can only be known experientially” (as opposed to, say, “conceptually”). But here he clarifies an important point that cuts right through the debate between the “constructivists” who, for various reasons and from different angles, reject the validity of an unmediated kind of “pure experience” (Katz and Proudfoot are clearly in mind, as is Robert Sharf, whom Hori specifically cites to refute on several counts), and the “perennialists” who offer worldviews built upon the acceptance of the possibility, validity, and epistemological viability of such a kind of experience (Robert Forman [*The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism*

and *Philosophy*, 1990] is an articulate proponent and noted representative). On the term “experience,” he makes a distinction between two kinds: “learning or knowing firsthand,” and “having pure consciousness.” Hori rejects the latter as shot through with conceptual problems (thus agreeing with Katz, Proudfoot, and Sharf on this point), and affirms the former as the field of discourse wherein “Zen experience” is situated.

In short, Hori’s account of Zen experience is on an entirely different plane from that of the “perennialists,” and does not depend on an acceptance of the possibility or validity of the notion of an ineffable kind of “pure experience,” or “pure consciousness event” for which Forman and others vigorously argue.

The experience of realization in a kōan is indescribable, but only in the very ordinary sense in which *all* immediate experience is basically indescribable. The resistance of a kōan to words is no stronger than the resistance of the aroma of a cup of coffee to verbal expression... So it is true that Zen can only be known by experience (in a quite ordinary sense of experience), but this does not imply that Zen is some kind of “pure experience” completely devoid of intellectual activity. (11)

Hori then goes on to describe contexts in which talk of *kenshō*, the experience of realization in Zen, makes perfect sense, and is a necessary feature of this form of Buddhist meditative practice. An earlier article of Hori, entitled “Kōan and Kenshō in the Rinzai Zen Curriculum,” published in *The Kōan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism*, edited by Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright (University of Hawai‘i Press, 2000, pp. 280–315), serves as a valuable additional reference for his account of the Zen awakening experience and its further deepening in kōan practice.

This reviewer finds a comment Hori makes in his initial chapter as extremely important: that “kōan practice is first and foremost a religious practice, undertaken primarily not in order to solve a riddle, not to perfect the spontaneous performance of some skill, not to learn a new form of linguistic expression, not to play cultural politics, and not to carry on scholarship... (these are) always subservient to the traditional Buddhist goals of awakened wisdom and selfless compassion” (6). He emphasizes this as a *normative* statement about what such practice is *meant to be* (italics mine), noting (and lamenting) the actual state of affairs wherein many Rinzai monks “engage in meditation and kōan practice for a mere two or three years in order to qualify for the status of *jūshoku* (resident priest), which will allow them to assume the role of a temple priest” (6).

The volume, as the subtitle indicates, is a sourcebook of phrases and verses used in kōan practice, whatever the particular individual undergoing such practice may make of it, to attain one’s credentials as a temple priest or to cultivate wisdom and compassion, or a combination of both. It is also, notwithstanding its self-deprecatory title, a veritable gold mine of information about East Asian history, literature, and culture in general. But it should also be a refreshing book for anyone who simply wishes to thumb through the pages every now and then and find a phrase or verse to ponder on or to enjoy, or drop at cocktail parties.

In perusing through the entries, and checking out the glossary at the back of the book, a reader will find not only one's knowledge of East Asian culture and history vastly enriched, with particular references to and descriptions of people and places that loomed in the background of these Zen sayings. One will also find her religious horizon deepened, as one is opened to the sources of wisdom that keep the Zen tradition alive today. This volume serves as a bridge that conveys the vast treasures of this Buddhist school of meditative practice as it developed through the centuries in East Asia, to new cultures and contexts in the West.

The world owes Victor Sōgen Hori, and all of those he cites in his Preface as having helped him in this endeavor, a deep debt of gratitude, for the many years of spiritual practice, careful research and reflection, and single-minded dedication that went into the compilation, composition, and publication of *Zen Sand*.

Ruben L. F. Habito
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