

# Translating the *Zen Phrase Book*

G. Victor Sōgen HORI

弄泥團漢有什麼限

*Deidan o rō suru no kan, nan no kagiri ka aran?*

That fellow making balls in the mud,

When will he ever be done?

In the near future, the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture plans to publish the *Zen Phrase Book*, a translation of the Rinzai Zen monastic handbook that contains the collected *jakugo*, or capping phrases, required for *kōan* practice. In the preface to the translation I will explain in some detail the *kōan* system and the capping phrase exercise, but will omit the story of how I came to translate this difficult and fascinating text. As I think this may be of some interest to the wider audience for whom this book is intended, I should like here to describe some of the more personal background to this work.

## The *Zen Phrase Book*

First, a word about the text. The “Zen phrase book” is not a single text but an entire genre of texts that collect and categorize classical Chinese Ch’an or Zen verses and phrases. The texts range from small handbooks of little more than two hundred verses to enormous compendia, reaching as many as twenty thousand phrases and verses. Some are bare collections of just the verses and phrases categorized according to the number of characters (4-character phrases, 5-character phrases, etc.). Others add varying degrees of information—*kudokuten* (margin symbols that indicate the Japanese reading), *kana yomikudashi* (the Japanese reading expressed in kana), *shutten* (citation of source), *chū* (annotation with explanations of meaning), *hyō-soku* (tone inflection, necessary for composing Chinese poetry), and so on.

The earliest Zen phrase books in Japan seem to have been compiled as handbooks by Zen monks in the thirteenth century for studying the Chinese language. Verses and phrases were selected to illustrate points of grammar or word usage in Chinese. Later collections of Zen verses were indexed according to the rhyme class

of the final character of the verse, categorized as 4-, 5- and 7-character couplets and annotated with citation of source and explanation of meaning. These telltale signs reveal that the collections were deliberately designed as reference books for Japanese monks composing Zen poetry in classical Chinese verse form. Later Zen phrase books served other purposes. A particularly interesting example is the *Amakusaban kinkushū* (*Amakusa Golden Phrase Collection*) compiled by Jesuit missionaries in the seventeenth century. This collection of Japanese proverbs and wise sayings was useful for foreign missionaries needing a hint for a good sermon topic. Although it was compiled by Christians, the numerous Zen verses it contained show how much a part of Japanese culture and language Zen had become. Interestingly, this text has become a valuable resource for Japanese linguists, since its Portuguese romanization preserves the pronunciation of the time more exactly than does kana.

Classical Zen phrase books contain Chinese verses and phrases, but there is also a Japanese phrase book whose verses and phrases come from Japanese *tanka*, *waka*, and *haiku*. In the twentieth century, numerous popular Zen phrase books collate and explain the verses and phrases that appear on scrolls used in the tea ceremony; these sometimes append a small lecture on the meaning of the verse or phrase. In an interesting reversal of cultural influence, a recent Chinese collection of Zen verses and phrases, based in part on Japanese sources, has appeared. Translations into Western languages are starting to appear.

The principal type of Zen phrase book, however, is the collection of verses and phrases that Zen monks use in Rinzai kōan practice. Upon the completion of a particular kōan, the Zen teacher instructs the monk to bring a *jakugo* 著語/着語 or “capping phrase” to express the point of that kōan. The monks search for a capping phrase in monastic versions of Zen phrase books made specifically for that purpose. Though small enough to be tucked into the breast of a kimono, the *jakugo* handbook is dense with meaning. The revised standard version, if we may call it that, of the kōan *jakugo* collection is the *Zenrin kushū* 禪林句集, a collection of more than 4200 verses and phrases drawn from a wide variety of Chinese sources including Buddhist sūtras, recorded sayings of Zen masters, the Confucian *Analects*, Taoist writings like the *Tao te ching* and the *Chuang tzu*, Chinese histories like the *Shih chi*, and vast quantities of T’ang Dynasty Chinese poetry. This collection started out as the *Kuzōshi* 句雙紙, a collection of 1200 verses and phrases compiled around 1490 by Tōyō Eichō Zenji (東陽英朝 1426–1504), a monk in the Myōshin-ji line. In 1683 (or perhaps 1687), a Confucian scholar turned Zen monk named Ijūshi 已十子 revised this text, increasing the number of verses to more than 4200, and provided it with scholarly annotation indicating original sources and comments to indicate the role of the verses in kōan practice. He also gave the col-

lection the title *Zenrin kushū*, a title that has since become a generic name for all Zen *jakugo* collections.

Both Rinzai kōan practice and the *jakugo* phrase book have evolved together over the centuries. It is not clear when the Rinzai Zen kōan curriculum took its present shape, although everyone credits it to Hakuin Ekaku (白隠慧鶴 1686–1769). Ijūshi's *Zenrin kushū*, however, appeared just before Hakuin was born, evidence that the capping phrase exercise was already a part of Rinzai kōan practice before Hakuin. More than three hundred years have passed since the *Zenrin kushū* first appeared. During this time, the Rinzai kōan curriculum itself has evolved. Perhaps the most visible development has been the formation of two sublineages within the Hakuin line, the Inzan and Takujū lines, named after Inzan Ien (隱山惟琰 1751–1814) and Takujū Kōsen (卓州胡僊 1760–1833), who were the direct disciples of Gasan Jitō (峨山慈棹 1727–1797), who himself was a direct disciple of Hakuin. All *rōshi* presently teaching in the Rinzai school in Japan belong to one or the other of these two schools. The two lines teach basically the same body of kōans, although in different order, and both think of themselves as transmitting the Zen of Hakuin.

Although there is no rivalry between the two teaching lines, there are inevitable differences. The Inzan school is generally said to be sharper and more dynamic in style, while the Takujū school is thought to be more meticulous and low-keyed. Many Zen teachers seem to know how the other school treats a particular kōan and there are even a few Zen teachers who have received recognition to teach in both lineages. Over the years, the two schools have developed slightly different bodies of Zen verses and phrases from which they draw their *jakugo*. Not surprisingly, in the twentieth century, two revised collections of Zen phrase books have appeared, Shibayama Zenkei's revised *Zenrin kushū*, which contains the capping verse collection of the Takujū line, and Tsuchiya Etsudo's *Zengoshū* 禪語集, which contains the capping verses for the Inzan line. The English translation *Zen Phrase Book* I am preparing is not a direct translation of any existing Japanese text, but a new compilation of all the verses found in these two modern collections. Publication of this new collection represents yet another step in the continuing evolution of the phrase book genre.

### *Seeing the Traces*

The Rinzai monastic *Zen Phrase Book* is used primarily by monks in kōan training, but it requires considerable scholarly effort to understand and employ, especially in later stages of kōan training. Most monks are practitioners first and make the effort at scholarship later only as required. My case was different. I began as a scholar and was subtly drawn over the line into practice.

I started out not in Zen but in Western analytical philosophy, specializing in philosophy of mind. My graduate studies were done at Stanford University, where the Department of Philosophy at the end of the sixties was still influenced by the logical positivist view that many of the traditional debates of philosophy were pseudoproblems that would dissolve if only strict and rigorous methods of logical reasoning were applied. My heroes at the time were Kant and Wittgenstein. Since Wittgenstein's writings, like the *Philosophical Investigations*, are collections of short, often mysterious, sentences and paragraphs, one might see here an early omen pointing in the direction of Zen.

One of my friends, a graduate student in the English department, was an enthusiastic disciple of Alan Watts and constantly urged me to extend my study beyond the narrow and parochial confines of academic philosophy. Reluctantly I received from him two books about Zen, one by Alan Watts and another by D. T. Suzuki. Although I did not subscribe to logical positivism, I did like tight logical arguments and agreed-on facts. My initial reaction to these two books was irritation at the vast sweeping claims made by authors who seemed to write more for rhetorical effect than for truth. I simply could not read them. After a suitable interval, I returned the books to my friend and feigned polite interest whenever he carried on enthusiastically about Watts and Suzuki. Years later when I entered the monastery of Daitoku-ji as an ordained monk, I still had not read any Watts or Suzuki, but I did learn there that not all is logical and there are facts upon which there is no agreement. But I am getting ahead of myself.

In 1970 I arrived in Japan with a scholarship from the *Monbushō* (Japanese Ministry of Education) to study the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō, at Kyoto University. At that time, few of Nishida writings had been translated into Western languages. Nishida's *Zen no kenkyū* had been rendered into English by Valdo Viglielmo as *A Study of Good*. It was widely agreed that this was not an accurate translation and I undertook a new translation, not so much for publication purposes but more to practice reading and writing in the language of Japanese philosophy. But my efforts at translation were crippled by my lack of knowledge of Buddhism.

At the time I was not aware that, although Nishida used the language of Western philosophy, he was expressing an outlook grounded in Mahāyāna Buddhism. He borrowed, for example, the term, *junsui keiken*, "pure experience," from William James, but then went on to say that, while for James the individual preceded pure experience, for him, pure experience preceded the individual. That reversal makes Nishida's notion of pure experience resemble less the psychology of William James and more the Mahāyāna notion of *śūnyatā*. However, at the time, without a background in Mahāyāna Buddhism, I was unable to recognize Mahāyāna Buddhism in the guise of Western philosophy or psychology. When I

was not frustrated or bored with the task of translating, I wondered why anyone considered such shallow name-dropping in any way significant or profound.

### *Daitoku-ji and Zazen*

I ended up staying a full twenty years in Japan, not because of Nishida but because of zazen. Sometime within the first year or two of my stay, I was introduced to Kobori Nanrei, the *oshō* of Ryōkō-in, a subtemple of the great Daitoku-ji complex, who gave me permission to join his zazen group. Immediately upon starting zazen, I felt that zazen was a deep and profound discipline from which I could learn a great deal. At the time, I had only a vague idea of why I was attracted to zazen. I began to hear stories of *satori* and *kenshō* but these were not what attracted me (I still disliked Suzuki and Watts). I began to hear other stories of previous lives recalled in zazen and deep insights into one's own personality. These too did not attract me. What attracted me was something located not in the field of cognition or emotion but in will: in zazen, one confronted one's own strength or weakness of will directly. How much control did I have over myself and my own mind? This question challenged me. Although I never did gain much self-control, I did eventually learn that certain kinds of cognition become available only after a great exertion of will.

For several years during the early part of the 1970s, I lived an idyllic life of academic study trying to translate the philosophy of Nishida by day while attempting to sit longer hours of more fully concentrated zazen by night. The first long *sesshin* I attended was at the Sotō Zen temple of Antai-ji, which put me through the excruciating pain of five days of solid zazen, each day fourteen periods long, each period fifty minutes in length. In the middle of one afternoon, half-delirious with fatigue and pain, I experienced how intense meditation can trigger long-forgotten childhood experiences. In zazen, I was once again seven years old, sick for two weeks with the measles. I found myself in bed listening to my only companion, the little radio by my bed. I heard again the announcer, Hal Kelly, introduce himself; I heard again the jingle announce the station, "CKEY 580 Toronto"; I followed again all the words of the next song right through to the end ("Sincerely, oh you know how I love you, I'd do anything for you, Please say you'll be mine,") and after that I listened to the commercial for Presswood Brothers Bacon and Ham ("Come gather round children, Listen to what I say, Get Presswood ham from your butcher's today. Wieners and sausages, bacon and ham, Get Presswood ham just as quick as you can.") This moment from childhood—already at the time more than 25 years old—came back to me not as an intellectual memory but as an experience re-lived.

Several years passed—water under the bridge. I submitted my dissertation on Wittgenstein to Stanford University and it was accepted. My Ph.D. assured, I asked Kobori Nanrei Oshō if he would ordain me. He consented and I moved into his temple Ryōkō-in to begin the formal training of a Zen monk. In addition to learning to chant sūtra and wear robes, cook and clean, chop wood and grow vegetables, boil up a bath and bow to the bath god, I began in earnest the literary study that accompanies Rinzai meditation and kōan practice.

Nanrei Oshō first began by teaching me the Confucian text *Daigaku* (*Great Learning*) in the traditional way. The text itself is written in classical Chinese but it must be given a Japanese reading called *kundoku*. Learning *kundoku* means to learn a body of complicated rules: what order to read the Chinese characters, which of several possible readings of a particular character to use, which of several possible conjugated endings of verbs and adjectives to employ, when a particular character is used for its meaning and when it is used as a grammatical particle, and so on. In each day's lesson, Nanrei Oshō would read a few lines of the Chinese text into *kundoku* and tell me to repeat it until I was able to read it by myself. Then he would read the next few lines and I would repeat. Almost the entire lesson consisted of read and repeat, read and repeat. At the end of the lesson, he would spend a mere five minutes explaining the meaning of the day's passage. Modern Western education tends to eschew this kind of learning by rote repetition and promotes learning by rational understanding. Later, I came to see that there was a third way of coming to understanding, direct insight, for which rote repetition was the greatest aid and rational understanding the great hindrance.

Daitoku-ji had a tradition of allowing foreigners to train. A generation earlier, in the 1950s and 60s, Ruth Fuller Sasaki had established the First Zen Institute of America in Japan on the grounds of the Daitoku-ji subtemple, Ryōsen-an, and some of her associates, notably Walter Nowick and Gary Snyder, sat and practiced with the monks in Daitoku-ji. After her death, Kobori Nanrei kept the door open to foreigners who wanted to train in Zen, and under his sponsorship two Westerners, Ray Coffin and Chris Jay, were ordained and entered Daitoku-ji. John Toler, a disciple of Nyoi-an, was also a monk about the same time. I knew from these, my elder-brother foreign monks, that as part of their kōan practice they were required to find *jakugo*, or “capping phrases” for whatever kōan they passed. The Japanese monks all possessed handbook collections of such *jakugo* but the Western monks had nothing comparable in English.

Thus, in my spare time I started the translation of the *Zengoshū* (*Zen Phrase Collection*), which was recommended by the Daitoku-ji *rōshi*. In my afternoon *Daigaku* lessons, I was learning a little classical Chinese, but as I had had no formal training, my ability to read and translate Zen verses in the original was far from adequate. Nevertheless, struggling with dictionaries and grammars, in a year as a

Zen novice, I was somehow able to complete a translation of the first half of this collection (the 1-character to the 10-character phrases). This was my sword to help me (and later other foreigners) cut through the entanglements of language in Zen kōan training. When in 1977, on April 8 (Śākyamuni's birthday), I finally went to bow at the entrance of the monastery to beg for admission, I had in my bag part of the English translation of the Zen capping-phrase collection.

*“Not founded on words and letters”*

It is commonly claimed that whatever Zen experience is, it is nonrational and incapable of being expressed in language. This claim is bolstered by the Zen school's own rhetoric: “Not founded on words and letters, A separate transmission outside of scripture.” Zen teachers insist that either a kōan is personally experienced or it is not understood at all. Zen stories, such as that of Śākyamuni giving a discourse on the Dharma by silently holding up the flower at which Kaśyāpa smiled, illustrate the Zen notion of wordless mind-to-mind transmission. Zen phrases and verses, such as “The deaf child has a beautiful dream” metaphorically describe the ineffability of Zen experience. With such dramatic rhetoric, it is understandably hard to believe that all Rinzai Zen monks get literary homework, small amounts in the beginning but quite considerable assignments in the latter stages of kōan training. Starting with “Mu,” one of the initial kōans, the monks are told to find a capping phrase that captures its point, and almost every kōan afterward is accompanied by such a literary assignment. At more advanced stages of practice monks get other kinds of assignments, such as the writing of essays and the composing of poetry, all of which require much study and research very similar to the academic study and research done in a university. I will describe this aspect of Rinzai kōan training in more detail in a preface to the *Zen Phrase Book*, “Literary Study in Rinzai Zen.”

The twin poles in Rinzai kōan training of direct experience and literary study do not conflict with each other. Given the kōan, the “Sound of one hand,” I quickly found that all efforts at rational understanding were futile. I had often heard that in order to solve a kōan, one was not to reason about it logically but to become it. But how does one “become” a kōan? Not knowing what else to do besides think, I had no recourse but to blindly repeat the kōan over and over again—rote repetition. Rote repetition is less an exercise of cognition or emotion and more a test of will. Will is ego in action, the self as a blind heat-seeking missile chasing a target. In other publications, I have described the process of coming to see a kōan in more detail. To make a long story short, in the beginning a monk first thinks a kōan is an inert object upon which to focus attention; after a long period of consecutive repetition, one realizes that the kōan is also a dynamic activity, the very activity of

seeking an answer to the kōan. The kōan is both the object being sought and the relentless seeking itself. In a kōan, the self sees the self not directly but under the guise of the kōan. (Some readers may see here a similarity to the ambiguity in the notion of *bodhicitta*.) When one realizes (“makes real”) this identity, then two hands have become one. The practitioner becomes the kōan that he or she is trying to understand. That is the sound of one hand.

Although Zen rhetoric claims that one cannot talk about Zen, the *jakugo* practice is the first lesson that Zen monks have in learning to talk about Zen. The *jakugo* exercise is deliberately designed to make the monk step back from the kōan and conceptualize it. Monks do not conceptualize in philosophical terms, even though Zen vocabulary contains philosophical terms like “emptiness” (*kū*), “impermanence” (*mujō*), “undifferentiatedness” (*mufunbetsu*), “differentiatedness within undifferentiatedness” (*mufunbetsu no naka no funbetsu*), and so on. Such technical terminology is said to “stink of Zen”. A skilful Zen monk shuns such obvious and pretentious language and instead uses the language of poetry or the colloquial language of everyday life to express himself. Thus, instead of speaking of the nonduality or the undifferentiatedness of emptiness, the tradition prefers instead to use colorful symbolic language.

日落月未上     *Hi ochite tsuki imada noborazu.*  
The sun has set but the moon has yet to rise.

一家父子     *Ikke no fushi.*  
Father and son in one house.

一刀一段     *Ittō ichidan.*  
One sword [cuts into] one piece.

This last image is particularly interesting. The usual expression is *Ittō nidan*, “One sword [cuts into] two pieces.” But one who has heard the “Sound of one hand” thus learns to speak of the experience thus: “One slash of the sword cuts into one.” Direct experience does not conflict with literary study in Zen, but is rather a necessary condition for it. We might say that *jakugo* practice is literary training in the use of words and letters that are not themselves founded on words and letters.

In turn, literary study in Zen encourages further insight. Before entering Daitoku-ji, I had been engaged in fairly serious zazen practice for several years. When I entered the monastery, I therefore found myself making comparatively swift progress with the first kōans. This was known to all the other monks, since first- and second-year monks must announce to the head monk whether they have passed a kōan. But when I was given the *jakugo* assignment for “Mu”, everything came to a complete halt. I had passed all the checking questions for “Mu” (“Divide ‘Mu’ into two,” and the like) but try as I might, I could not find a capping phrase to sum up “Mu.” Monks who are searching for *jakugo* are allowed to leave the *zendō*



where everyone else is sitting in zazen in order to page through the *Zen Phrase Book* searching for *jakugo*. Such monks are a little envied since they escape the *zendō* and the watchful eye of the head monk. They are expected to find their *jakugo* quickly, receive their next *kōan*, and get back into the *zendō* to sit. I remember sitting outside the *zendō* still searching for a *jakugo* and feeling great embarrassment, partly because it was evident that I was stuck and partly because I imagined the others were thinking I was deliberately prolonging my vacation outside the meditation-hall. Weeks went by. I lost count of the number of times I read the *Zen Phrase Book* from cover to cover. I could not find a verse that expressed the *kōan* “Mu.” Finally the *rōshi*, in disgust and impatience, gave me a hint. Suddenly I was overwhelmed by an avalanche of verses expressing “Mu,” all of which I had read many times before. The *Zen Phrase Book* was full of them. Every verse expressed “Mu”.

The *jakugo* practice serves many functions. From the *jakugo* that the monk brings for any *kōan*, the teacher judges the student’s grasp of the *kōan* and measures its depth; he estimates also the monk’s character—hesitant or daring, humble or arrogant, pedantic or imaginative. All of these aspects, important for the monk’s future career as a teacher of Zen, lie buried as innate potentialities within the direct experience of the *kōan*, but they are all brought to the surface for polishing in *jakugo* practice. The *jakugo* practice teaches the monk the language and culture of Zen. Having become the repository of an interesting insight, he learns the traditional language that generations of Zen monks have used to express that insight in teaching others. All experience eventually gets embodied and made concrete in behavior and language. A material substance like water or stone has no particular shape but every particular drop of water or piece of stone does. In Zen, experience has no particular form but the *jakugo* practice is deliberately designed to give each monk’s experience a particular form in thought and language.

In my early years at Daitoku-ji, I happened to be assigned the same new *kōan* as one of the other monks who had entered at the same time as I. Knowing I had already looked up the *kōan*, he asked me, “*Dō iu sutōri desu ka*” (“What is the story of the *kōan*?”) as if the story were merely the concrete example of some abstract point, as if the *kōan* were merely a particular instance of a general principle. Much monastery language supports just such a distinction between a metaphorical story and the abstract principle that it exemplifies. For example, the *rōshi* in lectures will often speak of the *hara no naka* (the inside of the belly) or the *kokoro* (the heart) or the *oku no imi* (the inner meaning) of a *kōan*, thus giving the impression that what is important is not the surface story but its abstract point or principle. Now, to talk of the point of a *kōan* is misleading in that it reifies the “point of a *kōan*,” creating an essence, an object, a *svabhāva*. Zen is the Chinese transformation of the Buddhist notion of *śūnyatā*, emptiness, and to say that there is an essential meaning to a *kōan* affirms the very thing that the notion of emptiness attempts to

negate. Thus Zen enthusiasts often depict such conceptualization as a hardening of the experiential arteries, an evil accumulation of detritus that clogs the life of the spirit. Nevertheless, monastic training takes the position that such conceptualization is not only inevitable but necessary, since it is in the very nature of formless ineffable experience to get instantiated in some conceptual form. Thus there can be no true comprehension of emptiness unless there is both the lived experience of the nonduality of subject and object of experience and also the intellectual conceptualization of it as an object of thought. Of course, one tends to get attached to one's conceptual ideas, but zazen is there to dissolve them. Of course, one gets attached to one's experience, but literary training is there to reconstruct ideas.

To the outsider, the return of literary training and conceptualization even if in poetical or colloquial language may appear to be a degeneration from the stated aims of Zen to break the bonds of rationality and conceptualization. But the point of such literary training is to break the bonds of nonrationality and nonconceptualization also, which are no less a form of attachment. Chuang tzu dreams he is a butterfly and when he awakes he is not sure whether he is Chuang tzu dreaming that he is a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he is Chuang tzu. The state of awakening is similarly one of ambiguity between two states. From the point of view of lived experience, intellectual conceptualization is an unreal dream whose images misrepresent things as they really are; from the point of view of intellectual understanding, lived experience is an unreal dream, a series of epistemological spasms without yet any articulate meaning. Awakening in Zen is the nonduality of these two states, the experiential for which the conceptual is a dream, the conceptual for which the experiential is a dream.

### *“Making balls in the mud”*

In my seventh year at Daitoku-ji, the *rōshi*, Nakamura Kan'un Shitsu, died. In the period that followed, the entire senior half of the monks dispersed to other monasteries. I transferred to the Entsū-ji monastery in the little town of Imari in Kyūshū. While it was a very useful learning experience for me to be a monk in such a rural setting, after a year and a half I left and transferred to the Nagaoka Zenjuku. The Nagaoka Zenjuku, located just outside of Kyoto on the train line to Osaka, is not a monastery or temple. It is more a Zen “boarding school” for university students. Although the head of the Zenjuku was a recognized *rōshi*, he had no monks in training, only university students who attended local schools. When I arrived, the *rōshi* initiated a course of intense practice, with three *sanzen* scheduled every day except Sunday.

An ordinary Zen monastery provides no time for monks to research the *kōan* they are working on, and in any case, monastery rules discourage open study.

However, at the Nagaoka Zenjuku, without the formal schedule of the monastery, I was at last able to do the study necessary to back up kōan practice. Such study was doubly essential for me, since as a foreigner I needed to do more study than the Japanese monks. I was able to complete a translation of the second half of the *Zengoshū* including all verses from 11 characters to more than 20 characters. This was the first complete draft of the English translation of the *Zen Phrase Book*.

In 1990 I returned to North America and quickly realized how difficult it is to live the life of a hermit in the marketplace. A significant number of Westerners in many different places had progressed into advanced kōan practice, and I soon began to receive requests for my draft translations of Zen phrases as well as corrections and other useful comments. All such communication was accompanied by the question: When was I going to publish the English translation? A year as the Numata Visiting Professor in Buddhist Studies at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University gave me a concentrated time period both to refine my *Zen Phrase Book* drafts and to retool myself in general for the task of teaching in Western universities. But the latter constantly threatened to swamp me under a constant stream of administrative jobs, and as a result progress on the *Zen Phrase Book* suffered.

The verses and phrases of the *Zen Phrase Book* are full of allusion and analogy. The translation of any given verse involved tracking down legends, stories, old poetry, and historical incidents. In addition, in rendering the phrases and verses into English, I had always to keep in mind that Zen phrases and verses have both a surface meaning and a deeper meaning. How to translate allusion and ambiguity—these were the two main foci.

Anyone engaged in translating texts from another time and culture knows the importance of tracking down key allusions or conventional meanings that, because they are taken for granted, are not explained in the text. The modern Western reader cannot be expected to know, for example, that “sweat horse” simply means “great effort” in Chinese.

從前汗馬無人識      *Jūzen no kanba hito no shiru nashi*  
We are not aware of the great efforts  
(sweat horses) in the past.

Or again, the average reader is not likely to know that “long wide tongue” is one of the thirty-two marks identifying the Buddha’s body and thus is a metaphor for eloquence in preaching the Dharma.

溪聲便是廣長舌      *Keisei sunawachi kore kōchōzetsu.*  
The splashing of the brook itself is the eloquence of the Buddha  
(long, wide tongue).

The following verse contains two opaque allusions:

罕逢穿耳客、多遇刻舟人    *Senni no kyaku ni au koto mare nari,*  
*Ōku wa fune o kizamu hito ni au.*

We seldom meet a pierced-ear traveller,  
We often meet men who slash their boats.

“Pierced-ear traveller” is a reference to Bodhidharma. The characters literally mean “pierced ear” but have nothing to do with earrings. The term refers to the belief that a copper chopstick can be passed right through the earholes of the skulls of those who have heard the Dharma during their lifetimes while the earholes of the ignorant are impenetrable. The one who “slashes the boat” recalls the ancient Chinese story of an ignorant official who accidentally dropped his sword over the side of a moving boat and, thinking to return later to search for it, notched a mark on the railing of the boat to mark the spot. We seldom meet a person of great awakening; the ignorant we meet all the time.

Chinese poetry in general is filled with allusion and analogy that creates a deeper meaning beneath the surface meaning of the words. What distinguishes the phrases and verses of the *Zen Phrase Book* is that the deeper level of meaning expresses the insight and vision cultivated by the kōan practice. Some verses contain allusions that will be recognized only by people directly engaged in kōan practice.

鬪首甌人攜劍去    *Kōbe o hasuru shōjin ken o tazusaete saru.*  
The man from Tseng who cut off his own head walked away  
with his sword.

This phrase occurs in the commentary to the main case of the *Hekigan-roku*, Case 38. What could this possibly mean? The sword in question is the famous sword with extraordinary powers, *Mo Yeh* (J. *Bakuya*). Although it figures in many Chinese legends, in this particular case it is in the hands of a traveler from Mount Tseng (J. *Shō*). The story of the traveler from Mount Tseng is told as part of the commentary to Case 100 of the *Hekigan-roku* (omitted from Cleary and Cleary’s English translation, *The Blue Cliff Record*). At the end of this complicated story, the traveler from Mount Tseng seeks out the King of Wu on a mission of vengeance. Enticing the king to lean over a cauldron for stewing meat, with his sword the traveler from Tseng cuts off the king’s head, which falls into the boiling cauldron. Then with his sword he cuts off his own head, which also falls into the cauldron. This dramatic action—cutting off one’s own head with a magical sword—must be seen in the context of Zen practice. Rinzai used to caution his monks that, by deliberately engaging in Zen practice seeking enlightenment, they were putting a head on top of their head, seeking an ox while riding an ox. The *Mo Yeh* sword is the Zen sword which with one slash cuts two heads into one. The phrase here reminds the monks that they must do this themselves, that no one else can do it for them.

Normally in translation work, a translation whose meaning is ambiguous is usually thought to be a bad translation. But Zen verses are deliberately ambiguous and one of the greatest problems in translating Zen verses is to translate ambiguity accurately. Consider this beautiful verse:

一重山盡又一重, 濫盡山雲海月情      *Ichi jū yama tsukite mata ichi jū,*  
*Kataritsukusu san'un kaigetsu no jō.*

Beyond one range of mountains, yet another range.

Beyond words, the feeling of these mountains and clouds, sea and moon.

Here the second verse is ambiguous. *San'un kaigetsu no jō* could mean a human observer's feelings as he or she gazes at mountains and clouds, sea and moon. Or it could mean that mountains and clouds, sea and moon themselves are sentient beings and that they have their own feelings unknown to humans. When I discussed this verse with Zen priests, I was told that this verse is interesting precisely because it is ambiguous, that a person's feelings for mountains and clouds, sea and moon, and the feelings that mountains and clouds, sea and moon themselves have, are not distinguished here.

Stand a long time on rocks overlooking the seacoast on a moonlit night and feel the living sea lap up and down against the ageless rock. Year after year the ocean has instinctively rubbed the shoulders of its constant companion, the slumbering rock who patiently tolerates the kind attention. As you gaze at them, you have the sense that the eternally moving sea and the living rock have minds of their own and you feel them gaze back at you. *San'un kaigetsu no jō*—Is that your feeling for them or their feeling for you? It is both. But how does one capture this in English? If I chose “the feel of mountains and clouds, sea and moon,” this would emphasize too much the human observer's feelings, and the verse then would seem to be saying merely that sense experience cannot be described in words, which is the less interesting part of the point of this verse. If I chose “the feelings [plural] of mountains and clouds, sea and moon,” this would emphasize too much the mountains and clouds, sea and moon, endowing them with too much mind and leaving out the human observer's feelings. In the end, I chose “the feeling of these mountains and clouds, sea and moon,” because it best conveyed the ambiguity of my feeling for mountains and clouds, sea and moon, and their feeling for me. Or, perhaps it is better to say, it was least offensive in terms of emphasizing one over the other. In any case, in the *Zen Phrase Book*, it is not the mark of a good translation to present one clear and definite image with an unambiguous meaning. Just as Zen constantly shifts back and forth between the experiential and the conceptual, so does a Zen verse often express two meanings, a surface meaning in which subject and object are differentiated, and a deeper one in which subject and object are not differentiated. “Beyond words, the feeling of these mountains and clouds, sea and moon.”

These examples make quite clear that Zen phrases and verses have more than one level of meaning. The deeper meaning (*oku no imi*) gradually reveals itself to the Zen practitioner as he or she continues to work through the kōan curriculum. With more and more maturity in practice, deeper and deeper levels of meaning of the Zen phrases and verses surface; these they take as *jakugo* for the kōan they are presently working on. The collected *jakugo*, the *Zen Phrase Book*, therefore is not an inert text whose meaning lies on its surface. It is “reader-involving literature”—like a good mystery novel that is interesting only to the reader caught up in attempting to solve the crime, or like Nabokov’s *Lolita* which is a vast joke on the unsuspecting Puritanical and prurient reader infuriated at its immorality. Some readers may have wished for a translation that not only explains allusions and conventional meanings but also makes explicit the implicit Zen meaning, but such a wish reveals a mistaken assumption. The implicit meaning of Zen verses is not some clear precise fixed thing hidden behind a veil of words. The Zen meaning is expressed in the ambiguity of the conceptual and the experiential, in the deconstruction of precise but false dichotomies, in the undercutting of an epistemological standpoint that constantly presupposes a subject of experience intentionally directed at an object. This deliberately cultivated ambiguity does not lie “out there” but is a reflection of the reader’s mind. It is the reader’s practice to make the words come alive.

*“Beyond one range of mountains, yet another range”*

When I first started translating the *Zen Phrase Book*, I handwrote the kanji and typed the translation on a typewriter. I looked up the kanji in dictionaries, and the verses and phrases in character texts, sometimes old *wahon* printed by woodblocks on thin rice paper. Now I compose on a computer, inputting both kanji and English using sophisticated software. More and more dictionaries are available in the form of CD-ROM and more and more original Chinese character texts are available in electronic form, making database searches simple and quick. But such electronic resources can create problems of their own that often complicate the process of research. For example, database searches quickly reveal how often different texts use slightly different versions of a particular verse or phrase. At first, one wants to establish the “true” version of the phrase, but further searches often compound the problem, rather than resolve it, and cast into doubt the very idea that there is a “true” version. Easy access to large databases can sometimes provide too much information. In the old days, when one wanted to track down the locus classicus of a phrase, armed with only ordinary library resources and one’s own memory and notes, one usually had only a few choices. Now in a matter of seconds, a computer database search provides huge amounts of information that can take days or weeks

to sort through. In my English translation of the *Zen Phrase Book*, I have not devoted much time to tracking down a phrase or verse to its original source, since this would have required a large investment of time for a comparatively small intellectual payoff. Where it was relatively easy to track down a verse or phrase to a source, I did so, but on the whole I have left this task to younger scholars who have more years of life left to cross that mountain range.

The *Zen Phrase Book* preserves the literary world of T'ang Dynasty Ch'an/Zen. Its images are those of the vast mighty rivers of China wide as the Inland Sea, so murky with yellow silt that clear mountain streams must have seemed miraculously pure and luminous; the high gorges where monkeys shrieked like a person in terrible grief; square walled cities made of stone and plaster with streets laid out in regular grids, facing south and glowing red as a phoenix in the evening sun; the flowing sands of the frontier desert where barbarians threatened either to take the hapless conscripted soldier into captivity or leave his bones bleached in the sand; the cultured world of highly educated men whose everyday expertise included calligraphy and music, so much so that they measured the beauty of a natural scene against that of a painting; the sense of history of the great past kingdoms of Wu, Yüeh, Ch'in and Han; Chinese symbols of feminine beauty—Hsi Shih, Yang Kuei-fei, Chao Chün; the constant presence of an emperor faraway and his bureaucratic officials close by.

Although it has created a minor text, the *Zenrin segoshū*, a collection of Zen verses from Japanese *waka*, *tanka*, and *haiku* whose images are more recognizably Japanese, Japanese Rinzai Zen has on the whole preserved this world of Chinese images. Still the *Zen Phrase Book* has always been an integral part of the Rinzai kōan curriculum and has evolved as the kōan curriculum itself has evolved. As more and more Westerners have progressed to relatively advanced stages of kōan practice, they have steeped themselves in the classical Chinese imagery of Japanese Zen. When they return to their homelands to transmit their Zen to other Westerners, it is quite likely that they will start to use a body of verses and phrases native to modern Western culture. No doubt a large part of the corpus of T'ang dynasty verses and phrases will be retained, but the next development of the *Zen Phrase Book* will certainly be the growing addition of verses and phrases whose images and language are natural to the West. The *Zen Phrase Book* will always be a work in progress so long as the kōan curriculum itself continues to evolve and change. "Beyond one range of mountains, yet another range."

This book is of great historical interest. As you read it, you will recognize the tension between Zen and the spiritual tools used by other sects of Buddhism. I am not familiar with the timeline, but it seems that Zen was just splitting from the other Schools in Huang Po's time (based on the numerous arguments comparing them). Even some tools of Hindu spirituality are discussed. After eighteen years of studying Zen, this is the most comprehensive work I have encountered. I have read Seung Sahn's insightful books more than several times while they are profound, they do not compare to the clarity of this translation of Huang Po. This translation "gently spoon feeds the reader like a kind and patient grandmother." Read more. 4 people found this helpful.