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INTRODUCTION
Capping-Phrase Practice  
in Japanese Rinzai Zen

Rinzai kōan practice, as it is presently conducted in the Rinzai monasteries of Japan, involves an element of literary study. Zen monks all have books. They need them to support their kōan practice, and the further they progress, the more their practice involves the study of texts and the writing of words. The Zen school, however, describes itself as “not founded on words and letters, a separate tradition outside scripture.” Much of traditional Zen literature heaps ridicule on the idea that one can comprehend or express Zen by means of written explanations. Take, for example, the striking metaphor of Rinzai Gigen, the founder of the Rinzai school:

There’s a bunch of fellows who can’t tell good from bad but poke around in the scriptural teachings, hazard a guess here and there, and come up with an idea in words, as though they took a lump of shit, mushed it around in their mouth, and then spat it out and passed it on to somebody else. (Watson 1993b: 61)

Standard images like “do not mistake the finger for the moon” remind the Zen practitioner not to confuse the label with the labeled, the descriptions that point to awakening with the experience of awakening itself. Poetic images like “the mute has had a wonderful dream” express the fact that even the most eloquent person can find no words with which to express the wondrous experience of awakening. Zen teachers also recount stories like that of Tokusan, the scholar of the Diamond Sutra, who burned all his previously precious books after he attained awakening (MMK case 28). Why then do Japanese Rinzai monks study books as part of their kōan practice? What books do they study? How can the study of such books be compatible with the struggle to attain the awakening that is beyond language?

Rinzai monasteries in Japan vary in the way they conduct kōan practice, but in the Myōshin-ji–Daitoku-ji branch, when a monk has passed a kōan the Zen teacher will instruct him to bring a “capping phrase,” called jakugo 着語 or agyo 下語. The monk selects a verse or phrase that expresses the insight he has had while meditating on the kōan. He searches for this capping phrase in one of the several Zen phrase books that have been especially compiled for this purpose. If the monk continues
into advanced stages of the Rinzai Zen kõan curriculum, he will receive further literary assignments: the writing of explanations in Japanese, called kakiwake (書き分け or 書き誇), and the composition of Chinese-style poetry, called nenrõ (詠). Such literary study is not merely an incidental part of kõan training. Monks begin capping-phrase assignments with Joshū’s “Mu,” one of the very first kõan, and continue searching for capping phrases throughout their entire training career. The research and writing required to complete kakiwake and nenrõ writing assignments can consume considerable amounts of time during the later stages of a monk’s stay in the monastery. If the point of kõan practice is to attain a nonrational, direct insight beyond the boundaries of language and conceptual thought, why is there such literary study in kõan practice? How can jakugo practice even be possible in Zen?

My aim in these introductory chapters is not only to describe the jakugo practice, but also to explain in general how the practice of meditative insight can be combined with literary study. I will also speculate on how this very interesting Zen practice evolved out of more general practices in Chinese literary culture.

Chapter 1 is more philosophical in tone and discusses the nature of kõan practice. It follows conventional accounts in emphasizing that “passing a kõan” initially involves an experience of insight for which intellectual understanding is neither a substitute nor an aid. At the same time, it argues that there is such a thing as intellectual understanding of the kõan, but it is dependent on the prior experience of insight into the kõan.

Chapter 2 gives an overview of the Rinzai kõan curriculum using the categories of Hakuin’s kõan system.

Chapter 3 describes the capping-phrase practice and its importance to both Rinzai kõan practice and to the structure of kõan texts.

Chapter 4 describes the Chinese “literary game” and argues that many of the elements that go into making up the complex image of a kõan—hidden meaning, sudden insight, mind-to-mind transmission, etc.—are features that have been borrowed or adapted from that tradition.

Chapter 5 describes the Zen phrase book, a group of texts that forms its own subgenre among Zen texts. In addition to a short history of the origin of the Zen phrase book, a more detailed, analytical account is presented of the five texts used to support the capping-phrase practice.

Chapter 6 explains the parts of the phrase entries, and also outlines the abbreviations and conventions used in this book.