About the Translation

This translation of the Record of the Transmission of Illumination (Denkōroku 伝光録) by Keizan Jōkin 摂山紹瑾 (1264–1325) is a product of the Sōtō Zen Text Project (Sōtōshū Shūten, Kyōten Hon’yaku Jigyō 曹洞宗宗典・経典翻訳事業). Founded in 1995 under the auspices of the International Department (Kokusaika 国際課) of the Administrative Headquarters of Sōtō Zen Buddhism (Sōtōshū Shūmuchō 曹洞宗宗務庁), the Sōtō Zen Text Project brings together a team of scholars with doctorates in the field of East Asian Buddhist studies to produce carefully researched and fully annotated English translations of texts that are important to the Sōtō Zen tradition.

A word about the principles of translation and annotation that the Sōtō Zen Text Project employs in the present work is in order. In the first place, our translation of the Denkōroku strives to mirror the syntax and vocabulary of the original Japanese and Chinese as closely as possible. That is to say, the translation is as literal as it can be without violating the norms of English grammar or becoming incomprehensible to readers who cannot access the two original languages of the text as points of reference.

Moreover, our English translation faithfully follows the Japanese (or Chinese) text given in the Shūmuchō edition of the Denkōroku at all times, even in those few instances where that text is almost certainly corrupt. In such cases, we duly translate what the text actually says, not what we believe the originally intended meaning to be. We then use notes to explain what the problem and its possible resolution are: how the text of the Shūmuchō edition disagrees with other recensions of the Denkōroku and/or deviates from known Chinese sources on which it is based; how the text of the Shūmuchō edition might be corrected; and what a more comprehensible English translation would be if it were to follow an original text emended in that way.

The work of the Sōtō Zen Text Project is guided by the fundamental principle that any good translation must be based on a solid comprehension of the original text. That is to say, the first and indispensable task of the translator is to understand the Japanese or Chinese text that he or she is to render into English. It is not permissible to translate in a mechanical manner, as computer programs do, transposing vocabulary items into one of their predetermined equivalents in the target language and treating grammatical markers in the original language as if they were some sort of algorithm to be automatically applied. Such a translation method, while it may lay claim to a certain kind of consistency and objectivity, is sure to produce gibberish much of the time. To repeat: the comprehending mind of a human being is the only agent that can achieve good translation. However, because the human process of understanding is never free from the possibility of misunderstanding, of seeing what one is predisposed to see and reading in meanings that the author of a text never intended, the translator’s comprehension of the original text must be informed and held in check by careful attention to precisely the kind of linguistic mechanics — the vocabulary and grammar — that machine translation relies on. It is not acceptable to merely intuit the meaning of
the original text based on a set of linguistic cues that one is unable to parse definitively, even if such a loose approach does allow one to produce English prose that is elegant and seemingly profound.

The upshot of these guidelines is that, when confronted by a sentence or passage in the original Japanese or Chinese that is difficult to comprehend, the translator cannot give up on understanding it and just mechanically convert the words into English, nor can he or she simply guess at the likely meaning and proceed to render that into English. When those two avenues are cut off, as they are by the principles of the Sōtō Zen Text Project, the translator is at an impasse. To proceed, he or she has no choice but to launch into rigorous philological research, in an attempt to figure out what the text in question means.

That research has several basic tools at its disposal, all of which have been frequently utilized in the present translation of the *Denkōroku*. In the first place, there are the research findings of other scholars, most of them Sōtō Zen monks writing in Japanese, who have striven to understand and interpret the text. Secondly, there are several existing translations of the *Denkōroku* into modern Japanese and English, more or less well annotated, that also show how other scholars have understood the text. Thirdly, when all such previous scholarship leaves the translator still in doubt about the meaning of a particular phrase or passage, there are a number of excellent Japanese and Chinese reference materials that one may consult, including dictionaries of Chan and Zen terms and sayings, dictionaries of East Asian Buddhism, and dictionaries of the classical Japanese and classical Chinese languages. Finally, and of crucial importance when all else fails, there is the single most powerful and useful tool of all: the digital search of East Asian Buddhist canons, as those have been input and rendered accessible by the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association (CBETA), the SAT Daizōkyō Database, and a few other less extensive digitizing projects.

The Sōtō Zen Text Project has, from its very inception, embraced and promoted the use of searchable digital text as a research tool. One key member of our team of scholars, Urs App, was a pioneer of efforts to digitize Chan and Zen texts that began back in the mid-1980s. His work in that area, assisted by Christian Wittern and others, eventually led to the formation of the CBETA project in Taiwan and the digitizing of a number of entire Buddhist canons written in Chinese. Although he is highly qualified to do so, App has not served the Sōtō Zen Text Project as a translator, but rather as our computer consultant. His contributions include the digital page layout of various publications, and the design and maintenance of an online database for the shared use of all our translators. That database now contains more than 16,000 technical terms that appear in Sōtō Zen texts, with suggested English translations for each term. It also embodies a wealth of research findings, facilitated by digital search, on the attested usages and meanings of many of those terms in Chan and Zen texts and in East Asian Buddhist literature at large.

The impact that digital search of Chinese Buddhist canons has had on the present translation of the *Denkōroku* is immense. Much of the difficulty that previous interpreters and translators of the *Denkōroku* have had in understanding the text
stems from the fact that it is full of quotations of other works — mostly Chinese Chan records — that go unmarked as such. Prior to the advent of the digital age, Japanese scholars succeeded in identifying many such quotations, but many others eluded them, with the result that they mistook various sayings of Chinese Chan masters that Keizan was quoting as Keizan's own words. Imagine the confusion that would result if the quotation marks were missing from an English sentence that speaks of “to be, or not to be” and “o say can you see?” The loss of the quotation marks would be no small thing, for along with them would disappear the clear allusions to Hamlet’s soliloquy (in Shakespeare’s play by that name) and the “Star-Spangled Banner” (the American national anthem), the grammatical integrity of the sentence, and the likelihood of the average reader making any sense of it. Comparable problems have arisen in the interpretation and translation of the Denkōroku, for when quotations of external texts go unrecognized as such, the reader is confronted with garbled grammar and statements that defy all logical interpretation. Digital search has enabled us to solve many such problems in the Denkōroku, by finding source texts in Chinese Buddhist canons and clearly distinguishing between Keizan's own words and those of other people that he is quoting.

Every chapter of the Shūmuchō edition of the Denkōroku begins with a short section, entitled Root Case (honsoku 本則), that is written in Chinese and presented as a quotation of some authoritative (albeit unnamed) source on the history of the Zen Lineage in India, China, and Japan. Every chapter of the Shūmuchō edition of the Denkōroku also ends with an even shorter section, entitled Verse on the Old Case (juko 頌古), that consists of a Chinese language poem attributed to Keizan as his own original composition. The bulk of every chapter, however, consists of two sections that are written largely in classical Japanese, albeit with an occasional quote in Chinese. One section, entitled Pivotal Circumstances (kien 機縁), is essentially the biography of an ancestral teacher in the Zen Lineage, with a detailed account of the verbal interactions with his own teacher that led to his awakening and recognition as a dharma heir. The other section, entitled Investigation (nentei 拠提), or Commentary (teishō 提唱) in one instance, contains Keizan’s explanations of and comments on the Root Case and Pivotal Circumstances, as well as exhortations to his own students to study and follow the examples set by the ancestral teachers.

A naïve reader of the Denkōroku might assume that whatever material appears in classical Japanese represents Keizan’s own words, spoken when he addressed his followers at Daijō Monastery where he was abbot. However, our digital search of the Chinese Buddhist canon has revealed that large chunks of Japanese text, especially text that appears in the Pivotal Circumstances section of each chapter, are actually Japanese transcriptions (yomikudashi 読み下し) of material that appears in Chinese sources. It is as if Keizan, when quoting those sources as historical background, translated them verbatim into Japanese to make them more accessible to his Japanese audience. The fact that the material in question appears in Japanese, however, has sometimes prevented scholars in the past from recognizing it as a transcription from Chinese. And even when they suspected that to be the case, there was no easy way for them to determine exactly what the Chinese
source text was. Our own digital search has had to rely on a kind of guesswork, where we took a Japanese phrase, rearranged the glyphs into Chinese word order, and then searched the Chinese canons for matches. Whenever that search produced a “hit,” the next step was to ascertain that the surrounding Chinese text matched the Japanese word for word, thus proving that we had found the actual Chinese source text. Then we had to figure out where in the Japanese text that particular quotation of a Chinese source started and stopped, and mark it off (by indentation) accordingly in our English translation. Such an approach was not impossible before the advent of digital text, but the sheer size of the canons, even if one limited one’s search to Chan records, made it largely impractical.

For all of the aforementioned advances facilitated by digital search, the Denkōroku remains a very difficult text to understand, and hence to translate. It is a huge step forward to realize that the text is filled with hitherto unrecognized quotations, often in Japanese transcription, of Chinese Chan texts. Nevertheless, even after making those discoveries, we as translators were still faced with making sense of the Chinese originals that are quoted, and figuring out what Keizan meant when he utilized them. Often we succeeded, but at times we did not. There remain passages where even the most assiduous research, exhausting all of the tools and methods mentioned above, left us with a set of possible meanings (and possible translations), but no way of determining which was correct. In such cases, we were forced to choose one of the translations, but we always state in a note that we are not sure of the meaning, and we explain what the alternative readings might be. Another basic principle of translation embraced by the Sōtō Zen Text Project is that, if we are forced to guess what something means, we lay bare that fact and invite other scholars to help solve the problem. We do not gloss over problems of interpretation; we use the critical apparatus of notes and Glossary entries to highlight, explain, and wrestle with those problems.

The literature of Chan and Zen, including the writings of the Sōtō School ancestors Dōgen and Keizan, is rightly famous for its witty, paradoxical, and often confounding use of language. Zen masters employ such linguistic devices, it could be said, to make us realize the inherent limitations and pitfalls of language itself, especially when we use it to try to grasp what is “ultimately real” (a notion that itself is just another linguistic construct). There is a profound difference, however, between the rhetoric of Zen that plays with language in a clever and calculated way to induce insight, and language that is merely confused and nonsensical. Unfortunately, because readers of Chan and Zen texts are accustomed to sage remarks that appear to be non sequiturs, when they are confronted by the garden variety of nonsense — e.g. the gibberish that results when mechanical translation is employed or quotation marks go missing — they are all too likely to chalk that up as normal for the language of Zen, which (they imagine) is not supposed to be comprehensible in the first place. Such a mode of reading, Zen Master Keizan tells us in the Denkōroku, is a serious mistake. He repeatedly exhorts his followers to strive “meticulously” to fully understand the Zen stories and sayings that he raises for their consideration. Implicit in that exhortation is the idea that they do, in fact, make sense.
Contributions to the work of translating Keizan’s *Denkōroku* were made by William M. Bodiford, Sarah J. Horton, Carl Bielefeldt, and the late John R. McRae; the final version of the translation was produced by T. Griffith Foulk. The scholarly research that informs the notes (and the Glossary found in Volume 2) was conducted by Bodiford and Foulk. The editorial task of checking the translation and notes for errors of substance and orthography was carried out by Bielefeldt, Bodiford, Foulk, Horton, Itō Yūji, Nambara Ikki, and others. The final copy editing was performed by Horton, and the complicated multilingual page layout was done by Urs App.

As Editor-in-Chief of this annotated translation of the *Denkōroku*, I give my heartfelt thanks to all who contributed to its successful completion. Whatever errors and infelicities remain in the final product are, at the end of the day, my responsibility.

T. Griffith Foulk