PREFACE

The Treasury of the True Dharma Eye (Shōbōgenzō, hereafter Treasury) was written by the master Dōgen (1200–1253) during the first half of the thirteenth century as a guidebook for his growing assembly of monks, who were studying meditation at the time of the emergence of the Sōtō Zen institution as a major component of religion in medieval Japan. Dōgen’s text has long been recognized as a masterpiece of traditional East Asian Buddhist literature for combining in thought-provoking ways Chinese sources he studied during a pilgrimage to the continent with Japanese grammatical constructions. Since being introduced to the English-speaking world about a half-century ago, the Treasury has been gaining increasing international acclaim for its innovative approach to expressing the Zen view of spiritual awakening. The past few decades have seen an impressive flow of translations and scholarly studies produced by specialists and comparative scholars, in addition to numerous publications geared primarily to the interests of Zen practitioners.

It seems clear that the Treasury is now appreciated perhaps as much as any other single work in the history of Buddhism. However, despite this widespread attention and acclaim, the Treasury remains particularly difficult to comprehend and is subject to diverse and sometimes conflicting interpretations. One of the main translators, Gudō Wafu Nishijima, confesses in Understanding the Shōbōgenzō, “The first time that I picked up a copy of the Shōbōgenzō, I found that I could not understand any of it, although I was reading a book written in my own native language.” This is a common reaction, he points out, because “Dōgen wrote using many
phrases and quotations from Chinese Buddhism which are relatively unknown to the layman, and difficult to render into other languages.”

In light of the intertwined attitudes of exhilaration and frustration that many new readers may feel in approaching the Treasury for the first time, my aim is to clarify the complexity of Dōgen’s writing by dealing with several main issues. First, this book explores the religious and cultural context, as well as the personal striving and aspiration, that led Dōgen to compose the Treasury, which was edited by the author and prominent followers. Second, it explains the basis for Dōgen’s use of inventive rhetorical flourishes in disclosing the foundation of contemplative experience. Third, it aims to elucidate the various versions and editions that have been constructed over the centuries by monks of the Sōtō Zen sect in terms of how these have been analyzed by premodern and modern commentators. Fourth, the book explicates the philosophical implications of Dōgen’s views on attaining and sustaining enlightenment by evaluating the role of meditation and other forms of monastic discipline in terms of the relation between Zen practice and societal concerns.

Readings of Dōgen’s Treasury of the True Dharma Eye contains two main divisions. The first section, consisting of three chapters, discusses the historical background and intellectual significance of the Treasury, especially involving the connections between different manuscripts that were not fully completed at the time of the master’s death and are still very much debated and disputed by scholars today. The second section considers five main thematic topics that form the basis of Dōgen’s approach to Zen theory and training, including the meaning of reality or Buddha nature, the impact of temporality and impermanence, the role of expressivity and language, deliberations on reflexivity and meditation, and the moral consequences of karmic causality. In addition, there are several supplementary sections, including a brief review in appendix IV of current complete translations.

Although numerous translations are available in English and other languages, it is fair to say that there is as yet no definitive rendition and that creating such a work is an elusive goal, given the incredible degree of intricacy and ambiguity embedded in Dōgen’s compositions. Therefore, in consultation with the editors at Columbia University Press, I have decided to use my own translations from the following source: Dōgen Zenji zenshū (Dōgen’s Collected Works), edited by Kawamura Kōdō 河村康道, et al. (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1988–1993), vols. 1 and 2 (of 7 vols.); this will be referred to in parentheses as “Dōgen,” with volume and page number...
provided. In the bibliography there are a couple of other Japanese compilations edited by Ōkubo Dōshū with the same title.

Since my translations contain brief passages culled from a much longer text, for each translated passage I reference four bits of information:

a) the romanized version of the Japanese title of that fascicle (see appendix I for a list of all the fascicles with Japanese in characters and romanization plus my translation of the titles, which may vary from the versions of other translators although the romanization generally does not);
b) the page number(s) in Dōgen Zenji zenshū, referred to as “Dōgen”;
c) the page number(s) in complete translation #1, referred to as “Nearman”;
d) the page number(s) in complete translation #2, referred to as “Tanahashi.”

The first complete translation cited by Hubert Nearman is Shōbōgenzō: The Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching, A Trainee’s Translation of Great Master Dōgen’s Spiritual Masterpiece (Mount Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 2007). The Nearman edition has the advantages of being reliable throughout and readily available as a single, searchable PDF located at https://www.shastaabbey.org/pdf/shoboAll.pdf. The second complete translation cited, by Kazuaki Tanahashi and a long list of cotranslators, including associate editor Peter Levitt and more than thirty others, is Treasury of the True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dogen’s Shobo Genzo (Boston: Shambhala, 2010). This is also a readable and reliable translation that is available in a single volume and also in digital editions; it features outstanding introductory and supplementary materials for understanding the history and philosophy of the text.

There are, however, a couple of important caveats in citing these two translations. Both the Nearman and Tanahashi renderings follow a different sequence of Treasury fascicles than I use, and they often select wording, including for the titles of fascicles, that is quite distinct from my choices. Therefore, readers should not be surprised in numerous cases to find that the three translations (mine along with Nearman and Tanahashi) vary considerably. Comparing the variable renderings will hopefully be a central part of the process of learning to understand Dōgen’s complicated text. Also, foreign terms are italicized for their first usage only. Moreover, the sequence of the fascicles is different in the Japanese edition I follow.
than in the versions used by Nearman and Tanahashi, which also vary to some extent.

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the Columbia Readings of Buddhist Literature series. This book has been in the works for over four years since my initial discussions with the series academic editor, Stephen F. Teiser, and the executive editor at Columbia University Press, Wendy Lochner. Yet, for me, the process of researching and writing began over forty years ago when I first studied the Treasury in graduate school with my mentor, the late Charles Wei-hsun Fu, and also gained knowledge from various scholars at Komazawa University in Tokyo, whose profound and detailed studies of the masterpiece continue to inspire my efforts.

In addition, I thank Kaz Tanahashi for providing the brilliant calligraphy of “Shōbōgenzō” used as the frontispiece. I also thank Professors Ishii Shūdō, Ishii Seijun, and Matsumoto Shirō of Komazawa for their sage advice, in addition to the spirit of their late colleague, Yoshizu Yoshihide, may he rest. I greatly appreciate that Carl Bielefeldt shared a series of drafts

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Figure 0.1 Cover page of a manuscript in a rare woodblock edition of the Treasury, c. 1800
of the wonderful annotated translation of the *Treasury* currently being prepared by the Sōtō Zen Translation Project. I am also very grateful to Rachel Levine for helping edit the manuscript, Michaela Prostak for her capable assistance with the glossary and index, and Maria Sol Echarren for her creative work in helping provide the images.

While conducting research for the current book I was led to acquire or examine several older versions of the *Treasury* that I had not previously scrutinized in depth. Figures 0.1 and 0.2, which show respectively the cover and final page, are from a weathered manuscript I purchased at an auction that was originally part of a rare twenty-volume woodblock print edition published around 1803 that includes seven of the more than ninety fascicles in the whole work.