**Performing The Ritual of Life**

**Satori—or awakening—is a living engagement with the world.  
By Dharmavidya David Brazier Tricycle Magazine Winter 2019**

The Japanese scholar and writer D.T. Suzuki, who is widely acknowledged for his role in introducing Zen Buddhism to the West, placed great emphasis in his essays and talks on the experience of [*satori*](https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/slow-motion-satori/), “awakening.” “Satori,” he wrote, “is the raison d’être of Zen, without which Zen is not Zen. Therefore every contrivance, disciplinary and doctrinal, is directed toward satori.” The sudden, direct, unmediated, spiritual apprehension of reality that is satori captured the imagination of Westerners hungering for a spiritual answer to the perplexities of life in secular industrial society. While Suzuki focused on the experience of satori, however, he did not give much attention to the matter of how that esteemed experience was to be attained.

In the mid-1960s, [Philip Kapleau](https://tricycle.org/magazine/philip-kapleau-zen-master-speech/)’s book *The Three Pillars of Zen* addressed precisely that issue, and its publication helped catalyze the wave of new Zen practitioners that rose then and subsequently. The three pillars of the title are teaching, practice, and enlightenment, and the book includes first-person accounts of satori experiences in the context of Zen training. (Throughout the book, Kapleau prefers to use the near-equivalent term *kensho*, “seeing one’s nature.”) With the publication of *Three Pillars*, the enlightenment experience described by Suzuki was brought home as something that was within the reach of regular people—such as the book’s readers—if they applied themselves to diligent practice under the guidance of a qualified teacher. According to *Three Pillars*, kensho is not only possible; it is, as it was for Suzuki, essential, and serious Zen practitioners are enjoined to apply themselves singlemindedly and with utmost determination to its attainment.

At the same time that *The Three Pillars of Zen* was gaining popularity, a very different approach was being taught by Shunryu Suzuki, the founder and abbot of the rapidly growing San Francisco Zen Center community. In 1971, an edited collection of Shunryu Suzuki’s talks on Zen practice,[*Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*](https://www.shambhala.com/zen-mind-beginner-s-mind-1799.html), was published, and it soon became as influential among Zen students as *Three Pillars*. Shunryu Suzuki taught a way of Zen practice very different from what is found in the works of D. T. Suzuki (no relation) or in *Three Pillars*, not least in his approach to satori: “We practice zazen to express our true nature, not to attain enlightenment. Bodhidharma’s Buddhism [i.e., Zen] is to *be* practice, to *be* enlightenment.” For Shunryu Suzuki, kensho was not unimportant, but it was “not the part of Zen that needed to be stressed.”

*Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* and *Three Pillars* were for years the core texts for Zen students, playing a pivotal role in establishing Zen practice in the West. Given the influence of these two pioneering texts and their sharp differences in approaching satori, it is little wonder that the matter even now continues to engender both debate and confusion.

Holding these contradictory perspectives side by side, satori emerges as a highly elusive matter. This elusiveness is furthered still when one considers that satori can refer not only to a sudden experience of spiritual illumination but also to a **transformed, awakened condition of being.** To explore this matter fully, one has to go back to the writings of the preeminent figure in Japanese Zen, Eihei Dogen (1200–1253), particularly the synthesis of his ideas in his most famous work, *Genjokoan*.

Dogen’s way is dialectical and dynamic. Dogen does not teach static doctrine. It is difficult to find Dogen’s position on a given matter; he may say something on one page and on the next page contradict that exact point. Dogen teaches a way of thinking and of being that endlessly transcends the given. He works with paradox. The given paradox of one’s lot, if fully lived, is naturally subsumed by a new, more encompassing paradox which in turn is subsumed by one still more encompassing. Dogen is not so much putting forward a point of view as demonstrating this ever-moving, ever-unfolding process. Dogen’s writings give active form to the mantra at the conclusion of the *Heart Sutra*, which says: “Go beyond, and go beyond that, and go beyond again, and then again.”

In fact, Dogen’s discussion of satori encompasses a number of seeming paradoxes. He asserts, for instance, that the state of satori is totally different from ordinary deluded existence, and he is at pains to emphasize this difference and the divide between them. They are, for example, as different as firewood and ash. He writes:

***Firewood becomes ash.  
It cannot become firewood again.  
However, we should not see it as ash after and firewood before.  
We should understand the dharma position of firewood: it has a before and after, the before and after exist, but it is not cut off from them.  
As for the dharma position of ash, it has a before and an after.  
The firewood has become ash and cannot become like firewood again.***

Firewood represents delusion, and ash represents awakening. Dogen is saying that while a deluded person may become enlightened, enlightenment is not continuous with delusion. Delusion is one thing, and enlightenment is another. Ash cannot go back to being firewood. Delusion has its before and after, which we call karma.  Satori also has its own before and after, but the continuity of satori is not with the deluded life that preceded it. The continuity of satori is with beginningless satori.

Life is one position in time, and death is one position in time, just like, for example, winter and spring. Do not think that winter becomes spring. Do not think that spring becomes summer.

The deluded person dies, and a buddha is born. The deluded person does not turn into a buddha, and a buddha does not go back to being a deluded person. Rather, awakening means that the deluded person has been forgotten, dropped away. Having stressed the discontinuity of delusion and enlightenment, however, Dogen also says that a person who has experienced satori might not even consciously know that it has happened. One does not need to know, as personal knowledge, that one is enlightened. Satori is not a personal attribute or achievement.

A deluded person might have the ambition to become enlightened, but that very ambition negates enlightenment. There is no method or technique that will securely bring one from one side to the other. For Dogen, satori is something that happens when the balance of conditions is right or, we could say, when a certain tipping point is crossed. But the crossing of this point is not something that an individual can plan, control, or make happen by deliberation.

Dogen describes this tipping point as being like the moment when water becomes a mirror. If you are standing at the side of a lake and you look at the water, you can perhaps see the fish and the waterweed and even the rocks on the bottom. At a certain point, however, the light may change, and instead of seeing the bed of the lake you see the clouds in the sky above. The water surface has suddenly become a mirror, which symbolizes satori. Water is sometimes transparent and sometimes a mirror. It is the mirror mind that is enlightenment.

Dogen employs the image of the moon reflected in a dewdrop to press this point further. Even a dewdrop—even the smallest dewdrop—can reflect the whole moon. Furthermore, the depth of the reflection is as deep as the moon is high. In this way, Dogen tells us how even an ordinary being can reflect the moon of the dharma and fill the world with light. The person who considers himself to be nothing may be an enlightened being, whereas the one who considers himself to be something almost certainly isn’t.

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Dogen’s teachings on satori can be frustrating, since he seems to say that there is nothing you can do about it. There is no practice or method that will result in your having satori. But he doesn’t just leave us there. Satori is, for Dogen, a darkening of the self, a principle that has roots as much in Daoism as in the Buddhist doctrine of non-self. The person who takes a position of humility is the one most likely to pass through satori. Furthermore, the darker the person the better will be the moon’s reflection, and the lower the person the deeper will be the reflection. Thus he advocates a dynamic humility.

The darkening of the self entails a total, complete and unconditional acceptance of one’s lot. This kind of acceptance is a turning around in one’s way of seeing things, such that self no longer has any special claim. Accepting one’s lot is not a kind of nihilistic or static withdrawal from engagement with life. It makes possible action that is not based on indulging the ego but is, rather, clean and positive. It is when there is total acceptance that change occurs naturally.

Dogen uses the Confucian term *li* to clarify this point. *Li* originally meant the correct performance of traditional religious rites. In ancient China it was considered essential for the living both to maintain a correct relationship with the ancestors and the balance between heaven and earth. This was done through ritual, which entailed laying aside self and giving power over to the Way, or Dao, of heaven. When one lived in accordance with the Dao, all would be well. For the Chinese, the three religions of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism were all intimately interrelated. In Chinese Buddhism, the Buddha’s awakening was understood as being an awakening to the Dao, and *li* was the practical expression of this as the then natural right ordering of daily life.

To have an intellectual understanding of satori does not get one far at all. The master meeting the disciple and hearing the latter’s account of his practice is not interested in clever ideas; he is interested in seeing evidence of li. Li is the right performance of the ritual of life. That ritual involves one with others and with all that is other. We talk about “environment,” putting the emphasis upon what is around us, but in satori one is part of it. It is not there for us; we have a duty to it and that duty is our lot, our part in the ritual. If we fail to perform it, relations between heaven and earth will break down and tragedy will ensue. It is a point that should not be lost on us today, standing as we do on the brink of ecological extinction as a result of human hubris.

This is the Buddhism that Dogen learned during his years of study in China; it is the dharma that was transmitted to him by his teacher Rujing; and it is the Zen that he established upon his return to Japan. To the present day, Soto Zen training entails a multitude of rules and regulations about the smallest details of daily life. This is the working of li, and in li the self is negated. It is no wonder, then, that Dogen so challenges the individualistic, secular mind-set of modern Westerners.

It would, however, be a mistake to see Dogen’s message as solely to do with the Soto school. This was not his intention, and he rejected being thus limited. Dogen was describing a possibility of liberation applicable for all people in all situations.

Many years ago, I worked as a social worker in a regional spinal injury unit in the north of England. A number of the patients were young men in the prime of their strength who had had a motorcycle accident or had fallen off a roof or had another similarly devastating accident that caused irreparable paralysis. There were two treatment modes in the unit. In one, patients were confronted with what had happened as soon as they came out of anesthesia: You are paralyzed, you will never walk again. In the other group, the news was broken more slowly and gently. The former group typically fell quickly into depression. However, at a six-month follow-up, those patients were doing a lot better than the members of the other group, who in the long term tended to become much more severely incapacitated. Those who took on their new situation, deeply accepting their lot, learned how to race wheelchairs along the hospital corridors. Those who did not accept it just lingered on. I found here something akin to Dogen’s teachings.

For Dogen, satori is a change of heart that comes about when one accepts one’s lot in a deep and dynamic fashion, no matter what a shock it may be to do so, and then lives one’s life to the full as one finds it. There is always something to get on with. This is li.

At the time of satori, a person might see visions or might not see visions, might have great realization or might not be aware that anything happened. The test lies not in epiphenomena that appear at the time but in the subsequent demeanor and behavior of the person. You can’t fake it. When a real change of heart has occurred, the world is a different place.

At the end of *Genjokoan*, Dogen tells a story from Zen lore:

Zen Master Baoji was using a fan.

A passing monk approached and asked, “The nature of wind is that it is always abiding. There is no place that the always abiding nature of wind does not encompass. What is the old priest holding on to that he needs to use a fan?”

The teacher answered, “Even though you know that the nature of the wind is to always abide and there is nowhere that it does not reach, you do not know the performance of the Way (Dao li).”

The monk said, “How is it that [knowing that] ‘there being no place it does not reach’ is not the performance of the Way?” The master simply carried on using the fan.

The monk bowed.

The Zen master’s fan here is a ritual object. It is used to occlude the face of the teacher when he or she is giving certain teachings or transmissions. It indicates the darkening the self. The monk is in effect saying to Baojing: “What have you got left to hide that you still need to use a fan? Surely the teaching is that all is pure and immaculate—the dharma wind blows everywhere. If you are an accomplished master, you should not need to use the fan.” The master tells the monk that he understands the teaching but does not understand its li. The monk then presses, “What then is its li?” The master simply continues to use the fan. In doing so, his performance is not an expression of self; it is action benefitting sentient beings.

The liberation of Buddhism is liberation *from* self, not liberation *of* self. Wherever life might take us, there is in every situation a li, a way of action that is, as the Chinese might have said, in accord with the way of heaven. If one lives thus, in accord with the Dao, in faith rather than ambition, satori will take care of itself.