

Rice Eyes

Enlightenment in Dogen's Kitchen

by Tai Sheridan

A Poetic Rendition of Dogen's
Tenzo Kyokun: Instructions to the Cook

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Website: <http://www.taisheridan.com>
Email: <mailto:taisheridanzen@gmail.com>

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Dedication

To the miracle of each small thing

My advice to you is not to inquire why or whither, but just enjoy your ice cream while it's on your plate – that's my philosophy.

Thornton Wilder

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Introduction

Handle Rice as if it is your own eyes – Dogen Paraphrase

Dogen lived from 1200 to 1253. He was the founder of the Soto lineage of Zen in Japan, a school of Zen now firmly rooted in America and the West. His seminal essay, Instructions to the Cook (Tenzo Kyokun), is an important treatise on living an aware and joyful life while engaged in daily activities.

'Rice Eyes' is a metaphor for the non-dual world, the essential Buddhist experience of oneness. Dogen uses the role of Tenzo, or head cook, to demonstrate how to live, work, and experience a joyful spiritual life that brings benefit to everyone. I have called the head cook the 'Chef de Cuisine' so that the poem addresses everyone, not just monastic Zen chefs.

I have transformed Dogen's essay from prose into poetry, and have created subdivisions by topic that clarify his writing. I have also replaced his thirteenth century idioms with contemporary language and images to make his ideas more easily understood.

Chef de Cuisine

welcome to dogen's kitchen
zen cooking down through time
cooking full attention everywhere
blood vein deriving from buddha
chefs de cuisine circles of light
steeping stillness attention letting go
cooking with buddha hands
being in charge tenzo chef de cuisine
appointed by life family friends food
nourishing everyone

chef de cuisine working devotedly
lovingly managing meals for hungry
cooking by vow calm clear connected
keeping spirit whole direct humble
throwing self into cooking
only possible failing not caring
awakening mind all tasks
wondrous variety differing needs occasions
one way cooking
helping all awakening

old great ones
cooking buddha's kitchen
guishan dongshan chefs de cuisine
kitchen working ordinary stirring pots
shop wash chop cook serve no big deal
your spirit the nourishment
dogen getting tips from old cooks
learning zen marrow
passing down rice eyes
any grub cooking most refined fare

Rice Eyes

chef de cuisine
working one whole day completely
checking cabinets fridge shelves
seeing what's in front of nose
rice vegetables condiments the works
dogen's cooking secret crystal clear
handling everything as own eyes
pot lid saucer spoon ladle
rice carrot lettuce beet radish
the whole universe - rice eyes!

touching food profound respect
gifts for royalty homeless all
touching kindly raw food cooked food
your own hands no other's
cooking between you food buddha
cooking today planning tomorrow flowing
planning with other cooks family friends
flavors seasonings dishes
how much just enough
tell all hide nothing

putting whole attention working
no lazing about doing it yourself
inquiring what situations demand
no knocking about absentmindedly
perfectionism ignores big picture
cooking oceans of virtue mountains of goodness
cooking harmoniously or nobody served
washing rice taking out sand
seeing rice seeing sand seeing sand seeing rice
fine meal naturally

Rolling Up Sleeves

old ones cooking nearby
cooking as form emptiness
washing sand picking rice
washing rice picking sand
using rice eyes
washing throwing out simultaneously
one eye tipping
the rice bucket
no dramatic personae
just washing cooking mind
going along sans fussing

rice sand fundamentals
rolling up sleeves
lost in cooking
wise ones settling down
working curious minds
own hands touching wasting nothing
keeping mind glued
all turning out well
paying attention being yourself
each rice grain mattering

re-using water no wasting
cleaning everything pouring rice
nobody peeking prodding hot pots
cleaning replacing pots ladles tools
high things on high places naturellement
low things on low places naturellement
gravity the root of grace
staying alert cleaning up
no thrashing mind about

Pot is Head

palms joining blessing food
singing to kitchen spirit
well cut gourmet discount wilted
no complaining regarding food
ridding comparisons
lots little good bad better worse
focusing mind seeing food
whole garden family
no room for whiners
incompetent cooking not

all day night just so moments
letting things come reside in mind
mind self being functioning whole works
mind universe cooking together now
before midnight getting ready for it
after midnight getting ready for it
soaking rice measuring water
standing at sink full presence
keeping eyes open
not losing one rice grain

seeing pot as head
seeing water as life blood
washing filling lighting cooking
rice soup salad heating all at once
bamboo baskets wooden bowls serving
seed shoots harvest rice wash cook serve
teaching zen cooking loving assistants
showing rice eyes shutting big mouth
chef de cuisine the kitchen pillar
heaven earth trembling

Build Temples From Greens

preparing mind the essence
rice not just a grain of rice
feelings besides the point
build great temples from greens!
chop wash clean expounding buddhadharma
tossing out likes dislikes greens really matters
no jumping for joy at special dishes
no moping over plain fare
beginner's mind not depending on quality
conforming to things not the way
devoting life spirit strengthening resolve
surpassing teacher's meticulousness refinement
applying life aspiration functioning for the way
way seeking mind the most important thing
plain soup from greens for a pittance
fine soup from greens for a pittance
no simple matter times have changed
scrupulousness total vitality passing muster
high aspiration sans arrogance
passing on rice eyes cooking way

uh oh oh no
horse mind running wild in fields
monkey mind swinging from trees
taking backward step stop look listen
life naturally one with work
simultaneously turning being turned
clarifying harmonizing absolute practical
correctly handling single green leaf
leaf manifesting buddha buddha manifesting leaf
free dynamism settling benefiting everything

Just Enough

eyes shut count all eating
do the math dharma numbers
one grain might be one grain
one grain might be one half grain
one grain might be two half grains
two half grains might be one grain
seeing surplus clearly
taking one away not enough
adding one too much
just enough the zen way

eating rice becoming guishan
adding a grain becoming cow
cow eating guishan guishan pasturing cow
counting again one two three
teaching according to capacity
using ingenuity practicing
seeing cow guishan one not two
temporarily cow guishan appearing separate
day to day remembering
one body one moment

money flowing
everyone figuring allocations
ancient sangha way
regarding all needs
no stepping on toes
remembering place
blessing rice serving rice
rice eyes cooking stability
don't waste time

Mushroom Men

preparing meals
buddhadharma par excellence
cooking way zen teaching
bowing thanking blessing food
sad people stuffing faces
old man lu drying mushrooms
crane white eyebrows sinew back
no hat bare feet hot sand sweating
mushroom man carrying load
quelle travaille fantastic!

old man of ayuwang
noodle soup chef de cuisine
walking forever searching mushrooms
never sloughing off cooking
nobody else souping
knowing practice knowing characters
buddha laughing roundly
short life hour always late
returning home returning home
mushroom way chef de cuisine

characters one two three four five
sitting standing lying down
all activities practice
nothing hidden world
truth cannot be grasped
moon in wave next wave too
two sided mushroom something nothing
ingenuity rice eyes grasping real zen
bottom of kettle beyond appearance
mushrooms always tasty

Oven Mouth

chef de cuisine practicing incomparable buddha way
mushroom men handing down
cooking way all working ways
meticulous care creating plenty
giving food clothing bedding medicine
shakyamuni died anointing chef de cuisine
eyebrow light gracing humans
serving sans fear not fearing serving
poverty enrichment middle way
unlimited mind unlimited fortune

good food bad food never grumbling
steady innards facing oven heat
respecting things as they is
old rice water original blessing
offering temple dates last dying act
sincere offerings buddha bond
small offerings big sincerity buddha bond
big offerings small sincerity not cooking way
human being practice
natural authentic sincere

choice ingredients not necessarily best soup
ordinary greens not necessarily worst soup
wholehearted handling the secret ingredient
pure mind pure heart no evaluation
delicacies plain tastes no distinctions
world as it is things as it is
cultivating aspiration cultivating rice eyes
a person's mouth an oven
heat melts everything together
whatever greens you have use well

Cooking Fool

foolish judging respectfulness worthlessness
long practice short practice neither wins
sans stability good bad reversing
differences abound so what
gifted not gifted stupid wise
just way seeking mind rice eyes
everybody treasured buddha child
forgiving mistakes wondrous dignity
going beyond right wrong
a fool a sage who can say

actualizing incomparable wisdom
blessings good fortune
one false step lost way
zen marrow total spirit infusion
noble chef de cuisine
foolish gabbing laziness busyness
not touching pot not thinking
rice eyes cooking the buddhist way
sans way seeking mind empty hands
no mountain goodness no ocean virtue

meeting teachers revealing cooking
aspiration awakening incomparable life
three attitudes the whole deal
benefiting others benefiting oneself
community working revitalizing character
going beyond teachers learning from lives
fool sees self as another
wise person sees others as self
sans true teacher feelings emotions rule
foolish people tossing out treasures

Three Minds

daigui awakening as chef de cuisine
dongshan awakening as chef de cuisine
realizing most important thing
no time more precious than now
child offering sand treasure
maintaining three minds
joyful magnanimous parental minds
grateful spirit joyful buoyancy
manifesting universal activity

born human miraculous amazing
no human no awakening no dharma drive
meal preparing vital important profound
cooking turning the wheel
community most precious
community sans pettiness
refined postures sans fabrication
lucky being human
lucky cooking rice eyes way
lucky serving three treasures

being human grateful joyous
so many births bad luck
heavenly realms divas pleasure attachment
hell realms self centered isolated angry sad
hungry ghosts love starved insatiable
animals beasts instincts ruling
asuras demons fighting jealousy reigns
nefarious bad luck no community practicing
limitations afflictions suffering burdens
no hands offering food

birth in world rejoicing yes!
using body freely offering food freely
honoring buddha dharma sangha
timeless universe marvelous opportunity
chef de cuisine merit never decaying
cooking at total capacity past present future
wholeheartedly in every moment every day
chef de cuisine cooking rice eyes way
connecting buddha dharma
joyful mind the attitude

parental mind loving children
loving three mind treasures
parental loving nourishing within difficulty
loving deep ocean high moon
parents forgetting selfish ways
protecting kids coral shade sun
living joyful mind second nature

handling water ice affectionately
everything parental caring
unconditional loving sans reward

magnanimous mind stable mountain
wide broad ocean views
no prejudice taking sides
an ounce not light
fifty pounds not heavy
spring can't carry you away
colors of fall sans heavy heart
seasons changing one whole time
balancing close broad perspectives
studying giving away magnanimous mind

fu awakening laughing out loud
guishan awakening blowing dead firewood
dongshan awakening three pounds flax
all cooking way seekers magnanimous
events circumstances the teachers
hearing voices expounding fundamentals
eyes wide open practicing living
pointing at moon pointing at plum blossoms
living true functioning living true self
rice eyes cooking

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About the Author

Poet Tai Sheridan is a Zen priest in the Shunryu Suzuki lineage. He trained with San Francisco Zen Center, Dharma Eye Zen Center, Berkeley Zen Center, Zen Heart Sangha, and The Shogaku Zen Institute. He specializes in transforming ancient Buddhist and Zen texts into accessible and inspirational verses.

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