

**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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## **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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