

Beyond awakening: A mixed-methods analysis of life after kensho and the psychology of spiritual integration

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Abstract: To advance an understanding of post-kensho experiences, particularly the psychological and existential challenges that follow, this research utilizes a general interpretivist framework guided by grounded theory techniques. Thirteen in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with individuals who reported experiencing a kensho awakening. From the axial coding analysis, three overarching categories emerged: (1) challenges, (2) purification, and (3) reluctance to share, each encompassing distinct yet interconnected themes central to post-awakening integration. A subsequent qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) identified specific conditions associated with heightened awareness of post-kensho struggles. The strongest explanatory model indicated that increased awareness of struggle occurs primarily when egoic tendencies persist without being offset by sustained mindfulness practices, openness in sharing experiences, ongoing contact with the awakened state, or recognition of the fleeting nature of kensho. These findings challenge prevailing assumptions that spiritual awakenings inherently lead to sustained clarity or ease, emphasizing instead that kensho initiates a complex psychological and existential process requiring intentional and continuous integration. This research thus provides novel theoretical insights, reframing kensho not as an endpoint but as the beginning of an ongoing, nuanced transformation.

Keywords: spiritual awakening; kensho; integration; post-awakening challenges; transpersonal psychology; Zen; self-inquiry

1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a resurgence in academic and cultural interest in mysticism, spirituality, esoteric traditions, and consciousness-expanding modalities, driven in part by a broader societal shift toward inner exploration and meaning-making (Overall and Rosalind, 2022; Overall, 2020, 2021, 2025a; Pew Research Center, 2017; Pollan, 2018). This phenomenon includes increased engagement with mindfulness practices, contemplative traditions, and a marked revival of interest in psychedelic-assisted therapies, commonly referred to as the psychedelic renaissance (Griffiths et al., 2018). Empirical data underscores this growth; surveys by the National Institutes of Health indicate substantial increases in meditation and mindfulness practice, with the proportion of U.S. adults reporting regular practice rising from 4.1% in 2012 to 14.2% in 2017 (Clarke et al., 2018). Moreover, the global wellness market—which encompasses mindfulness, meditation, and spiritual practices—is currently valued at approximately \$4.5 trillion, with the mindfulness and meditation segment alone projected to exceed \$9 billion by 2027 (Global Wellness Institute, 2023). These trends suggest that an increasing number of people are engaging in practices that often culminate in, or are explicitly designed to catalyze, spiritual awakenings—profound

experiential shifts in consciousness that radically alter an individual's perception of self, others, and reality.

Contemporary psychological research identifies spiritual awakenings as impactful transformative events, often marked by increased well-being, empathy, interconnectedness, and psychological resilience (MacLean et al., 2011; Taylor, 2017). Reported awakenings appear to be on the rise; qualitative and quantitative studies have documented growing numbers of individuals self-reporting awakening experiences associated with both meditation retreats and psychedelic sessions (Griffiths et al., 2018; Yaden et al., 2017). Despite this surge, the precise mechanisms, integration processes, and long-term psychological trajectories following awakening remain inadequately understood.

Within the broader category of spiritual awakenings, the Zen Buddhist concept of kensho offers a distinctly well-defined phenomenon. Kensho refers to a sudden, intuitive insight into the nature of reality and self, characterized by a deep recognition of non-duality and emptiness (sunyata) (Kasulis, 1981; Suzuki, 1970). While Zen literature extensively documents the phenomenology and philosophical implications of kensho, empirical research exploring post-awakening integration and its psychological complexities is sparse. The extant literature primarily addresses traditional contexts, leaving significant gaps in understanding kensho's relevance and impact within contemporary secular and multicultural settings.

One structured contemporary method explicitly designed to facilitate kensho experiences is Charles Berner's self-inquiry dyad protocol, embedded within the 'enlightenment intensive' retreat format. This protocol synthesizes eastern contemplative self-inquiry with structured western interpersonal techniques, aiming to produce reliable, reproducible awakening experiences (Berner, 1968). Although preliminary studies suggest the efficacy of this method in inducing authentic awakening experiences (Harel et al., 2021), systematic scholarly examination of participant experiences—especially the challenges and ongoing integration post-kensho—remains critically underdeveloped.

Addressing these significant knowledge gaps, the present study aims to explore deeply the experiential landscape of life following a kensho awakening, emphasizing the challenges individuals face as they integrate profound spiritual insights into everyday life. By utilizing a combination of qualitative interpretive analysis and qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), this research builds upon and extends previous theoretical and empirical investigations. Specifically, it seeks to illuminate the psychological, relational, and existential dynamics post-kensho, offering empirical clarity and theoretical depth to phenomena that have traditionally been documented primarily through anecdotal or doctrinal perspectives.

In the first section of this article, the literature on spiritual awakenings, kensho awakenings, and the post-awakening integration process is reviewed comprehensively. This review includes an examination of Charles Berner's self-inquiry dyad protocol. Subsequently, the methodology is presented, beginning with a qualitative analysis involving interviews with 13 individuals who have experienced a kensho, followed by a second, complementary study employing QCA to examine systematically the challenges associated with post-kensho experiences. The article concludes with a detailed general discussion of the research findings and their limitations.

2. Literature review

2.1. Spiritual awakenings

Spiritual awakenings have been extensively explored across multiple disciplines (Overall, 2025b), encompassing psychological, neuroscientific, transpersonal, religious, and contemplative frameworks. The concept has deep historical roots across spiritual and mystical traditions. In early Christian mysticism, awakening was often framed as divine illumination or union with God, as seen in the writings of Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross, who emphasized the purgative, illuminative, and unitive stages of spiritual development (Underhill, 1999). Similarly, Sufi mystics described awakening through the metaphor of the annihilation of the self (*fana*) in divine presence (Schimmel, 1975). In the eastern traditions, Vedanta and Zen Buddhism conceptualized awakening as the realization of non-duality and the illusory nature of the ego-self, culminating in *moksha* or *satori*, respectively (Suzuki, 1956; Sharma, 1996). These traditions, though culturally and theologically distinct, converge in describing spiritual awakening as a transformative realization of a deeper, more authentic dimension of being.

Modern scholarly inquiry into spiritual awakening gained traction with William James's (1902) seminal work, "The Varieties of Religious Experience", which framed mystical experiences as a legitimate domain of psychological inquiry. James emphasized ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity as key features of awakening, a framework that has remained foundational in empirical psychology. Subsequent developments in transpersonal psychology during the late 20th century further institutionalized spiritual awakening as a topic of scientific exploration. Researchers such as Stanislav Grof, Ken Wilber, and Roberto Assagioli argued that awakening represents not pathological delusion but the expansion of consciousness into higher developmental stages (Grof and Grof, 2017; Wilber, 2007).

Contemporary psychological literature defines spiritual awakening broadly as an experiential shift in awareness that profoundly transforms one's perception of self, others, and reality (Corneille and Luke, 2021; Taylor, 2017). Such awakenings have been examined through various lenses, including psychological growth, altered states of consciousness, and mystical experiences (Hood et al., 2009). From a neuroscientific perspective, research using neuroimaging techniques has identified characteristic brain activity associated with spiritual awakenings, such as reduced activity in the default mode network and altered connectivity patterns, correlating with experiences of self-transcendence and unity (Barrett and Griffiths, 2018; Newberg and Waldman, 2009).

Empirical studies in transpersonal psychology highlight that spiritual awakenings frequently emerge from intense meditation practices, existential crises, or spontaneously without clear antecedents, leading to significant psychological and behavioral changes (Cortright, 2010; Grof and Grof, 2017). Psychedelic research has further expanded this understanding, demonstrating that substances such as psilocybin can reliably induce awakening-like mystical experiences, leading to enduring increases in openness, empathy, and psychological resilience (Griffiths et al., 2018; MacLean et al., 2011).

Post-spiritual awakenings

Life experiences following spiritual awakenings constitute a burgeoning area of academic inquiry, reflecting both remarkable positive transformations and considerable psychological challenges. Empirical research consistently highlights that awakenings can generate lasting enhancements in emotional well-being, empathy, and resilience. Studies report that awakened individuals often describe deepened interpersonal relationships, increased environmental connectedness, and enhanced life satisfaction (Fredrickson, 2004; Pargament and Exline, 2021). These benefits suggest awakening as a meaningful catalyst for holistic psychological growth.

Despite these positive outcomes, individuals frequently encounter significant challenges in the integration and stabilization of awakened states into daily life. Psychological literature increasingly acknowledges the complexity and variability of the post-awakening trajectory, wherein periods of profound clarity can alternate with episodes of confusion, anxiety, or emotional turmoil (Brunnhuber, 2020). Qualitative research particularly emphasizes how awakened individuals often grapple with identity shifts, existential uncertainty, and the re-emergence of unresolved psychological material, requiring substantial emotional and spiritual labor (Masters, 2010; Taylor, 2017).

Furthermore, awakened states are often fleeting, requiring deliberate practices such as meditation, embodied awareness, or community engagement to sustain and deepen integration (Dahl et al., 2015; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Neuroscientific research aligns with this view, indicating that without consistent integrative practices, neural correlates associated with awakened states diminish over time, thereby highlighting the necessity of ongoing contemplative practice to maintain spiritual insights (Lutz et al., 2008).

Additionally, awakened individuals may experience difficulties in communicating their experiences due to social stigma or fear of misunderstanding, resulting in increased social isolation or internalized struggles (Chadoir and Fisher, 2010; Fenner, 2003). Such social dynamics introduce an essential interpersonal dimension to post-awakening integration, suggesting that social validation, support systems, and open dialogue can significantly enhance psychological integration and well-being (Pargament and Exline, 2021). While spiritual awakenings offer profound potential for psychological and emotional transformation, their integration into ordinary life involves navigating substantial intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociocultural complexities.

2.2. Kenso spiritual awakenings

While spiritual awakenings are widely studied across mystical and psychological traditions, the Zen Buddhist concept of kensho offers a distinct and historically grounded understanding of awakening as a sudden, intuitive insight into one's true nature. Rooted in classical Chinese Chan and Japanese Rinzai Zen, kensho (literally, 'seeing into one's nature') is described as a profound yet often momentary experience of direct realization, unmediated by conceptual thought or ritual (Suzuki, 1970). Traditional Zen literature, particularly the teachings of Hakuin Ekaku and Dogen Zenji, emphasizes that while kensho marks the beginning of authentic spiritual insight,

it is not synonymous with full enlightenment (satori) but rather the first glimpse of it (Yampolsky, 1967).

Unlike broader mystical experiences that often focus on emotional transcendence or states of bliss, kensho is characteristically marked by sudden, non-dual insight into the emptiness of self and phenomena (emptiness or sunyata), followed by a radical reorientation of perception (Abe, 1985). The Rinzai tradition, for instance, employs koan introspection—paradoxical statements or questions—to provoke kensho by undermining discursive thought and opening intuitive cognition (Heine, 2008). Importantly, kensho is not viewed as an endpoint but as the catalyst for sustained, disciplined practice—what Zen calls post-kensho training (Stevens, 1990).

In contemporary contexts, kensho has gained renewed attention in both eastern and western scholarship (Overall, 2025b) for its relevance to existential psychology, mindfulness-based interventions, and the phenomenology of consciousness. However, much of the academic discourse remains grounded in doctrinal Zen perspectives, particularly those emphasizing the rigorous ethical and meditative frameworks necessary to stabilize and deepen the insights derived from kensho (Kasulis, 1981). Scholars have increasingly warned against the commodification of kensho in modern spiritual movements, cautioning that without the contextual rigor of Zen practice, such experiences risk being misinterpreted as final or self-validating (Faure, 1993; Sharf, 1995).

Post-kensho spiritual awakenings

Life after a kensho experience is often characterized by both deep spiritual clarity and significant psychological complexity. Classical Zen texts rarely discuss the aftermath in explicit psychological terms, but they do caution that initial awakening can give rise to subtle ego inflation, spiritual pride, or confusion if not properly integrated through continued practice (Hori, 2000). Modern empirical and interpretive studies echo this view, highlighting that post-kensho periods may involve oscillations between awakened insight and re-emerging patterns of self-centeredness, emotional reactivity, or existential doubt (Taylor, 2017).

The blessings of kensho, as documented in lived accounts and phenomenological analyses, include a heightened sense of freedom, interconnection, presence, and compassion—qualities often referred to as the ‘fruits of awakening’ (Kornfield, 2000). These shifts are not merely transient mood states but appear to reflect deeper ontological transformations in one’s relationship to self and world. However, such transformations also necessitate adjustments in personal identity, social functioning, and worldview. This echoes themes in both Zen and transpersonal psychology that emphasize the destabilizing as well as liberating consequences of sudden awakening (Washburn, 1995).

One of the central challenges reported in post-kensho life is the integration of non-dual insight into the fabric of ordinary experience. Without continued meditative discipline and ethical grounding, practitioners may find themselves unable to access or embody the clarity once felt during kensho (Hershock, 2005). The Zen concept of go-on (returning response) underscores this point—awakening must be continually re-enacted and embodied in relationship, community, and action (Kasulis, 1981). This

reintegration process is often subtle and nonlinear, demanding resilience, humility, and ongoing contemplative inquiry.

Another difficulty concerns the social and interpersonal dynamics that follow awakening. Individuals may struggle to communicate their experience or feel alienated from conventional social norms. Some may experience a kind of spiritual loneliness or feel misunderstood by those unfamiliar with contemplative practice (Sharf, 1995). These difficulties mirror broader findings in the psychology of spiritual transformation, which suggest that integration depends not only on internal practice but also on the availability of relational, cultural, and institutional support (Pargament and Exline, 2021).

2.3. Charles Berner's self-inquiry dyads

The self-inquiry dyad protocol—most notably systematized by Charles Berner in the enlightenment intensive retreat format—emerged as a hybrid methodology rooted in both eastern and western contemplative traditions. The practice synthesizes the Zen Buddhist method of self-inquiry (koan introspection) with Western interpersonal communication models drawn from dyadic psychotherapy and humanistic encounter groups (Berner, 1968; Trott, 2010). From the East, it inherits the central existential question of self-inquiry: ‘Who am I?’—a method historically employed in Zen as a gateway to sudden awakening (Suzuki, 1970). From the west, it adopts a structured dyadic format that emphasizes active listening, uninterrupted expression, and interpersonal presence, rooted in Carl Rogers’ (1951) person-centered therapy and Fritz Perls’ (1969) Gestalt dialogic exchange (Masters, 2010). Berner’s synthesis aimed to accelerate the realization of direct insight (kensho) by merging solitary meditative introspection with a relational container designed to bypass ego defenses and habitual narrative structures.

At the core of Berner’s enlightenment intensive is a precisely timed dyadic structure in which two participants alternate roles between active listener and contemplative expresser, typically in five-minute intervals. The individual receiving the instruction (e.g., “Tell me who you are”) is encouraged to make contact with their direct, non-conceptual experience and articulate this openly to their partner, who listens without response or judgment (Berner, 1971). This cyclical format is repeated continuously over the course of three-day residential retreats, usually embedded within silent periods and guided meditative support. The intention is not to arrive at a philosophical answer but to catalyze a moment of direct knowing or noetic realization that transcends discursive thought.

Empirical studies on self-inquiry dyad intensives remain relatively limited but are growing in both methodological diversity and disciplinary interest (Overall, 2025b). Quantitative research has indicated that participation in enlightenment intensives leads to statistically significant increases in self-transcendence, emotional clarity, and interpersonal closeness, as measured by standardized psychological scales (Harel et al., 2021). Participants often report outcomes consistent with the phenomenology of spiritual awakening, including expanded awareness, decreased ego-identification, and heightened states of presence (Trott, 2010). In this sense,

Berner's protocol may be seen as a reliably reproducible structure for inducing altered states of consciousness that carry both spiritual and psychotherapeutic relevance.

Qualitative investigations have further elaborated on the transformational arc of dyad-based inquiry (Overall, 2025b). These accounts often describe an initial phase of psychological resistance or cognitive agitation, followed by a breakdown of conventional self-narratives and the emergence of intuitive insight or spontaneous stillness (Harel et al., 2021). This phenomenological progression closely parallels descriptions of kensho within Rinzai Zen, where practitioners undergo an intense confrontation with the limits of their conceptual mind before experiencing a sudden collapse into direct realization (Heine, 2008). In contrast to solitary Zen practice, Berner's dyad protocol facilitates awakening through relational reflection, enabling individuals to realize insights by articulating them in the presence of a silent, attuned other. (Berner, 1968).

Several theoretical frameworks have been proposed to explain the efficacy of the dyad protocol. From a transpersonal perspective, the practice functions as a mirror that amplifies one's emergent sense of being beyond egoic identity (Friedman, 1983). From an interpersonal neurobiological standpoint, the continuous face-to-face interaction and empathic attunement may regulate affective arousal and support right-hemispheric processing associated with intuitive and non-verbal awareness (Siegel, 2010). Although few studies have directly examined these mechanisms in controlled environments, preliminary findings suggest that the protocol may activate cognitive and affective processes conducive to transpersonal breakthrough.

Importantly, Berner himself maintained that enlightenment was not something 'taught' but rather uncovered through uninterrupted self-inquiry in a permissive yet disciplined social field. He reframed awakening as a communicable and relationally facilitated event, challenging the notion that deep spiritual realization must occur in isolation. This reframing positions the self-inquiry dyad not merely as a meditative practice but as a socially engaged technology of consciousness transformation.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study 1

To advance an understanding of post-kensho experiences—particularly the psychological and existential challenges that follow—the first study employed a general interpretivist framework guided by grounded theory techniques. Thirteen in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals who reported having undergone a kensho experience. While grounded theory methodology traditionally involves concurrent data collection and analysis in a cyclical process of constant comparison (Suddaby, 2006), this study intentionally diverged from that norm. In this case, all interviews were completed prior to the onset of data analysis, allowing for a clean division between collection and interpretation (Overall and Wise, 2016; Overall, 2025b; Suddaby, 2006). Data analysis commenced only after the final interview, at which point transcripts were subjected to open and axial coding procedures as articulated by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

Following established qualitative protocols, the initial phase of analysis involved disaggregating the textual data into thematic units (Ojastu et al., 2011). Microsoft

Word was used to facilitate the coding process, utilizing the color-coded comment function to create, refine, and consolidate codes (Overall and Wise, 2016; Overall, 2025b). This iterative engagement with the data allowed for the emergence of meaningful clusters of concepts that reflected common patterns across participants' narratives (Ojastu et al., 2011).

3.2. Data analysis

In this research, all 13 participants had experienced a kensho spiritual awakening during a structured retreat informed by the self-inquiry dyad method developed by Charles Berner. The retreat facilitators possessed extensive experience with Berner's protocol. They provided a list of individuals who they confirmed had experienced a kensho. All participants were considered to be at an advanced stage of consciousness development, characterized by sustained contemplative practice and prior engagement with various consciousness-expanding modalities. Most were regular meditators and had participated in multiple forms of self-inquiry, somatic integration, or transpersonal exploration prior to their kensho experience. Importantly, kensho experiences are inherently idiosyncratic and not easily replicable under controlled conditions (Taylor, 2017). Despite structured practices aimed at fostering conducive states, the outcomes remain highly individualized and unpredictable (Hood, 2001; Overall, 2025b). This inherent variability renders spiritual awakenings difficult to standardize, emphasizing the importance of post-hoc inquiry and analysis rather than prospective replication.

Much of the existing literature on spiritual transformation focuses not on producing awakening experiences but on investigating their antecedent contexts and psychological effects (Taves, 2009). The emphasis in this study similarly lies in examining emergent patterns across those who have self-reported kensho events, contributing to a growing body of scholarship concerned with mapping the contours of spiritual transformation (Hood et al., 2009).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom, each lasting approximately 60 min (see Appendix). The semi-structured interview protocol was designed to elicit detailed phenomenological descriptions of the kensho experience, with questions shaped by prior literature on spiritual awakenings, non-ordinary states, and egoic dissolution (Grof, 1985; James, 1902; Taylor, 2017). Drawing on insights from transpersonal psychology and integration studies (Ferrer, 2002; Wahbeh et al., 2022), the author employed professional intuition—as validated within interpretive paradigms (Etherington, 2004; van Manen, 1990)—to synthesize previous research and determine which questions would best access the emotional, somatic, and ontological dimensions of awakening. The protocol addressed three temporal domains—pre-, peri-, and post-awakening—aligned with phenomenological best practices (Lindahl et al., 2014). Interview data were analyzed using grounded theory techniques, beginning with line-by-line open coding and followed by axial coding to develop interrelated thematic categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Silverman, 2008). This approach enabled inductive theme generation while maintaining analytic coherence across the dataset.

Interviews were spaced across a timeline ranging from three months to fifteen years post-retreat, offering both near-term and long-range perspectives on post-kensho

integration. Ethical procedures followed the Canadian Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2), with informed consent obtained through participant information letters.

Analytical procedures began with a comprehensive line-by-line coding of all 13 transcripts (Deterding et al., 2021; Silverman, 2008). This open-coding phase yielded 1090 unique codes. To assess the salience of emerging concepts, a frequency analysis was conducted to identify recurring codes and common patterns (D’Andrade, 1995; Overall and Wise, 2016). As Strauss and Corbin (1990) define open coding as “the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (p. 61), this phase enabled the identification of dominant themes associated with post-kensho experiences, particularly around psychological struggles and existential recalibration. Themes such as the ego versus the natural state, heightened self-awareness, positive transformations, and the transient nature of awakening surfaced with consistency (see **Table 1**).

Table 1. Open-coding examples.

Post-kensho themes	Total frequency of response	% of 13 respondents
The ego versus natural state	25	100
Positive life changes	91	100
Importance of continued mindfulness practice	25	92
Awareness of struggles	40	92
Kensho is fleeting	23	69
Never shared kensho experience with anyone	5	39
Hesitant to share kensho experience	8	39

These codes were then further analyzed through axial coding to detect interrelations among categories (Overall and Wise, 2016; Silverman, 2008). According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), axial coding involves “putting data back together in new ways... by making connections between categories” (p. 96). In this phase, conceptual linkages between themes within and across individual interviews became apparent. Three overarching categories emerged through this process, each composed of distinct yet interrelated themes: (1) challenges, (2) purification, and (3) reluctance to share (see **Table 2**). These categories will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

Table 2. Axial codes.

Post-kensho categories	Themes
Challenges	(1) The ego versus natural state (100%), (2) awareness of struggles (92%), and (3) kensho is fleeting (69%)
Purification	(1) Positive life changes (100%), (2) importance of continued mindfulness practice (92%)
Reluctance to share	(1) Never shared kensho experience with anyone (39%), (2) hesitant to share kensho experience (39%)

3.3. Challenges

3.3.1. The ego versus natural state

Participants consistently highlighted the ongoing tension between the egoic self and the experience of their natural state following kensho. Interviewee #11 illustrates the complex relationship between awakening and embodiment: “I’m exploring other

techniques of embodied inquiry and continuing to allow the unhealed trauma to come out continuously, even post awakening... Because I feel like the ego hides in the body sometimes.” Here, the participant articulates a profound understanding that awakening does not eradicate personal traumas or deeply embedded egoic patterns. Rather, there remains a continual process of embodiment and healing necessary to anchor an awakened state. This insight aligns with contemporary discussions in transpersonal psychology, emphasizing the integration of spiritual awakening through embodied practices (Cortright, 2010). Interviewee #11’s reflection highlights the novel perspective that kensho itself may not represent a culmination but rather the commencement of a deeper integration journey involving the physical body and psychological dimensions, thus extending existing theories that often treat kensho as an endpoint rather than a transformative initiation (Overall, 2025b).

Interviewee #4 further emphasizes the subtle yet persistent presence of ego-based self-doubt post-awakening: “There’s still one big issue that I haven’t resolved, which is self-doubt... The kensho probably helped with that. But that self-doubt is pretty deep in this being.” This account reveals that awakening does not erase core psychological struggles; instead, it softens their intensity, creating space for ongoing inner work. While earlier psychological and spiritual literature tends to conceptualize spiritual awakenings as decisive turning points (Stokke and Rodriguez, 2021; Taylor, 2017), Interviewee #4’s reflection indicates a more nuanced and incremental transformation. This contributes a novel understanding by suggesting spiritual awakening as a gradient rather than a binary process, expanding our grasp of the spiritual journey in relation to deep-rooted psychological patterns.

Although the existing literature on mystical experiences often emphasizes dramatic shifts in perception and awareness (Hood, 2001; James, 1902), this narrative uniquely captures the gradual and somewhat disorienting process by which these states fade. This extends the conversation within transpersonal psychology by explicitly acknowledging and articulating the felt experience of losing direct connection to one’s awakened state.

3.3.2. Awareness of struggles

Following their kensho experiences, participants demonstrated heightened awareness of ongoing internal struggles, particularly in relation to ego reassertion. Interviewee #3 underscores the necessity of consistent spiritual practice to sustain the awakened perspective: “I’m more aware, but the ego comes back, of course... my meditation practice in the morning and the evening is really important.” This participant acknowledges awakening as a dynamic rather than static condition, illustrating the necessity of ongoing discipline to counteract habitual egoic patterns. Such perspectives enrich scholarly discussions on spiritual maintenance practices, confirming and yet expanding prior findings regarding the indispensability of routine spiritual practices in sustaining awakened states (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Pascoe et al., 2023).

Interviewee #8 describes an enhanced awareness that allows them to detect and address fear-based mind patterns: “At different points since the kensho... I can remind myself, oh yeah, the mind is getting pretty active right now.” This heightened meta-awareness aligns with psychological research identifying increased cognitive

flexibility and self-observation capacities following significant spiritual experiences (Chatterjee et al., 2024; Dahl et al., 2015). However, the participant provides novel experiential depth by emphasizing active self-correction in daily life, indicating that awakening fosters not merely awareness, but the practical application of spiritual insights into routine psychological management.

In a similar vein, Interviewee #12 describes navigating the ego's attempts at self-sabotage post-awakening: "Sometimes the mind wants to come in and test... But then I catch it right away... No more sabotaging or shaming." This testimony uniquely contributes to the literature by illustrating awakening as an ongoing interactive negotiation with the ego rather than a final liberation. It expands the dialogue in transpersonal psychology by positioning awakening as a practice of continual, vigilant self-awareness rather than merely a transformative event.

3.3.3. Kensho is fleeting

Participants also articulated the transient nature of the kensho experience. Interviewee #11 describes subsequent, though less intense, recurrences of the awakened state: "Within a week... I felt that same presence... that's happened maybe 10 times since the kensho... It's not as dramatic." While the initial kensho may evoke an overwhelming sense of unity and transcendence, the recurrence of such states appears to be more subdued, signaling a shift from peak experience to integrative encounter. This episodic recurrence aligns conceptually with peak spiritual experiences discussed in classic mysticism literature (Maslow, 1964), and more recently, with discussions on the gradual interiorization of spiritual insight (Brunnhuber, 2020). Rather than signaling regression, the softening of intensity may indicate a deeper process of normalization and internalization. Interviewee #11's description challenges assumptions that spiritual insight must remain intense to remain meaningful, suggesting instead that subtlety may mark maturation rather than loss.

In many cases, participants framed the fleeting nature of their kensho not as failure, but as a transition into a new phase of meaning-making. Interviewee #13 compares their kensho to a lucid dream: "My kensho seemed like one of my lucid dreams... it's not that it's with me moment to moment." This metaphor of waking from a dream encapsulates the difficulty of sustaining non-dual awareness amid everyday consciousness. While lucid dreams often imply a heightened agency and presence, they are nonetheless impermanent—mirroring the paradox of spiritual awakenings that feel vividly real yet elude permanence. This reflection aligns with work by Newberg and Waldman (2009), who observe that neurobiological correlates of mystical experiences often lack long-term stability, necessitating deliberate practices to retain their integrative potential.

What emerges across these accounts is a more dynamic, layered understanding of kensho. Rather than a permanent shift into an enlightened state, participants describe a movement between insight and reabsorption into egoic or habitual patterns. This oscillation foregrounds the importance of recognizing kensho not as an endpoint but as part of a cyclical or wave-like developmental arc. Such findings challenge more static portrayals of awakening found in both traditional mysticism and popular spiritual discourse and align with process-oriented models of spiritual development that emphasize ebb and flow (Cook-Greuter, 2000). Participants' narratives extend

these models by anchoring the conversation in lived phenomenology, offering rare qualitative insight into the subtle textures of post-awakening life.

3.4. Purification

3.4.1. Positive life changes

Participants frequently reported significant positive transformations following their kensho experiences, emphasizing enhanced connectivity and a renewed sense of personal well-being. Interviewee #6 succinctly captures this shift: “So my life has been pretty spiritual and positive in terms of connectivity with people, with myself, with my surroundings, with nature.” This statement reflects an expansion of relational awareness and interconnectedness typically described in mysticism literature, yet it extends existing perspectives by explicitly incorporating relational aspects with self, others, and the environment as inseparable facets of spiritual growth. Such interconnectedness aligns with theories of eco-spirituality, which emphasize harmonious coexistence with nature and community as central to spiritual maturation (Bellehumeur et al., 2023; Berry, 2009). Here, however, the participant contributes a nuanced insight by highlighting how kensho specifically facilitates such holistic connectivity in everyday life.

Participants also noted their enhanced capacity to transform negative situations positively post-kensho. Interviewee #5 describes this transformative cognitive shift, stating, “I take a negative situation and learn something from it and then carry on with a positive aspect without trying to drag the negative with it.” This narrative exemplifies an active reframing strategy, reflecting deeper psychological resilience and increased emotional intelligence post-awakening. While previous psychological literature underscores the role of cognitive reframing in resilience (Fredrickson, 2004; Hemsworth et al., 2020), this finding uniquely positions kensho as a catalyst for rapid and intuitive emotional reframing, distinguishing it from traditional cognitive-behavioral interventions.

Participants reflected on positive somatic outcomes from their awakening. This offers novel insights into potential psycho-physiological benefits associated with spiritual awakenings. Such reports challenge dominant psychological paradigms that frequently separate spiritual experiences from physical health outcomes. Instead, this finding uniquely highlights the integrative health implications of profound spiritual transformations, suggesting the need for a more holistic understanding of spiritual awakening within transpersonal psychology.

Interviewee #1 further emphasizes a holistic transformation extending into their professional life: “Life just changed completely... my job hasn’t changed, but I have changed. It’s not the job that I remember... But now I just love everything about it.” This account highlights an internal rather than external locus of transformation, enriching current psychological theories on workplace satisfaction by demonstrating spiritual awakening’s role in fundamentally altering perceptions of one’s professional environment (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001). Interviewee #1’s testimony uniquely positions kensho as transformative of the subjective experience of work, thereby contributing to broader debates about spirituality in professional contexts.

3.4.2. Importance of continued mindfulness practice

The ongoing importance of mindfulness and meditative practices was strongly emphasized by participants in maintaining post-kensho benefits. Interviewee #1 outlines a rigorous mindfulness practice aimed at maintaining clarity and groundedness: “I have just been practicing meditation... being mindful of how I engage with things and really looking at things as they are without being wrapped up in them.” This account highlights mindfulness as a necessary practice to sustain clarity and detachment from ego-driven narratives. Although extensive literature emphasizes mindfulness’s general benefits (Shapiro et al., 2006), this participant uniquely underscores mindfulness as integral to preserving and integrating kensho-induced insights, emphasizing a more targeted application of mindfulness for maintaining spiritual states. Further, this reflection aligns closely with Zen Buddhist teachings, particularly regarding ongoing vigilance and sustained mindfulness as critical for managing the persistent nature of ego (Suzuki, 1970). However, this participant enriches current perspectives by explicitly framing post-kensho meditation as a continual, nuanced discernment practice—highlighting ongoing purification rather than attainment as the central task in spiritual life.

Interviewee #4 reinforces this idea of ongoing practice as necessary for minimizing psychological disturbance: “I used one of [facilitator’s] meditations... just help ground again. And then it has minimized since then... ego has been quieter.” This emphasizes active maintenance practices rather than passive experiences of awakening. The notion of deliberately returning to structured meditative practices aligns conceptually with the psychological literature on meditation’s role in emotion regulation (Lutz et al., 2008; Parker and Schooler, 2024). However, the participant uniquely contributes by explicitly demonstrating meditation’s role in managing fluctuations of post-awakening psychological states, thus positioning meditation as an essential tool rather than merely a complementary practice.

Interviewee #6 similarly describes meditation as a reliable pathway back to their awakened state: “Every time when I meditate... I can start grasping it again—that feeling of being light... having peace.” Here, meditation serves as a deliberate strategy to reconnect with the spiritual insights gained from kensho. While previous research highlights meditation’s role in fostering general well-being (Bartlett et al., 2021; Kabat-Zinn, 2003), this finding uniquely identifies meditation as an essential practice specifically for rekindling kensho states, suggesting distinct experiential specificity within post-awakening contexts.

Interviewee #5 further expands this discussion, noting additional supportive practices: “Started doing yoga, doing more meditation, getting into nature a lot more... that helped a lot.” This perspective aligns with integrative spiritual approaches highlighting a combination of mindfulness, somatic practices, and nature-based immersion (Louv, 2008). However, the participant’s testimony uniquely suggests these practices’ cumulative importance specifically in stabilizing and enriching the ongoing purification process following kensho, thus deepening the dialogue between transpersonal psychology and holistic spirituality.

3.5. Reluctance to share

3.5.1. Never shared kensho experience with anyone

Participants expressed deep reservations about discussing their kensho experiences, often leading to complete silence on the subject. Interviewee #1 provides a clear articulation of the internal struggle and subsequent relief upon finally sharing: “But I want to say, [interviewer] that this session today was so helpful for me to really integrate some of my experiences because I haven’t spoken about this to anyone.” This participant’s reluctance underscores the profound vulnerability associated with revealing spiritually transformative experiences. Their hesitance can be contextualized within broader psychological discourses that explore societal attitudes toward mystical or transcendent experiences. Historically, mystics and spiritual experiencers have faced misunderstanding or persecution, resulting in a deeply ingrained hesitancy to share openly (Underhill, 1999). Contemporary psychological literature also highlights that silence may stem from fear of social stigmatization or from anticipation of misunderstanding, invalidation, or even pathologization (Pargament and Exline, 2021). The relief Interviewee #1 describes upon sharing emphasizes how the act of verbalizing such experiences can serve not only as emotional relief but also as an integrative practice, reinforcing the notion that articulation is a significant step in spiritual integration and psychological reconciliation.

Moreover, Interviewee #1 recognizes the value in being able to discuss spiritual phenomena openly and authentically: “Also, this interview has really helped me to see that it’s okay to talk about it, and it’s okay to talk about it without ego.” This reflection uniquely highlights the additional internal barrier—fear of ego inflation—that might deter individuals from discussing their spiritual breakthroughs. Existing psychological research emphasizes how spiritual communities often caution against ego-centered sharing to maintain spiritual purity or humility, inadvertently contributing to silence or secrecy (Cauble et al., 2023; Wilber, 2007). Interviewee #1’s experience suggests a nuanced psychological dynamic where the spiritual ego becomes both a source of potential insight and an object of caution, thus enriching transpersonal psychology’s discourse on the complex interplay between ego, humility, and authentic expression.

The concept of the ‘spiritual ego’ refers to a subtle psychological mechanism by which the ego reasserts itself through identification with spiritual accomplishments or insights (Masters, 2010; Vonk and Visser, 2021). Rather than dissolving, the ego may reemerge in refined forms—such as the pride of having awakened or the belief in one’s spiritual superiority (Fenner, 2003). This dynamic is often masked by humility or spiritual language, making it difficult to detect. As such, the fear of falling into spiritual egoism can inhibit open sharing, as individuals may question whether their motivation to speak arises from genuine connection or covert self-enhancement.

3.5.2. Hesitant to share kensho experience

Similarly, participants described hesitation in sharing their experiences, largely due to anticipated societal reactions. Interviewee #9 captures this cautious approach explicitly: “In our society there’s trepidation about talking about these things depending on who’s around... before I felt it needed to be hidden because of the disdain society has towards it.” Here, Interviewee #9 touches upon social perceptions of spirituality and mystical experiences as esoteric, fringe, or even unacceptable topics

for public conversation. This hesitancy resonates with social psychology research documenting widespread skepticism and stigmatization of spiritually oriented discussions within Western, secularized societies (Houtman and Mascini, 2002; Rutjens and van der Lee, 2020). However, this participant also signals a gradual shift toward openness, marking a critical point of personal development and confidence in their own experiences. Their account thus provides novel insight into the internal negotiation process individuals undergo when deciding whether and how to share spiritually transformative experiences in potentially unsupportive cultural environments.

Interviewee #7 further exemplifies this cautious discernment: “I was being very careful who I was telling about these spiritual experiences that I was having.” This statement suggests that participants strategically evaluate social contexts before sharing, reflecting sophisticated social and psychological self-management skills. The careful selection of confidants aligns with theories of selective disclosure, often employed by individuals possessing stigmatized identities or marginalized experiences (Chaudoir and Fisher, 2010). While selective disclosure has predominantly been discussed in contexts of identity management, Interviewee #7 uniquely applies it to spiritual experiences, highlighting an understudied dimension within spiritual psychology—the deliberate social management of mystical experiences. By emphasizing the complexity of socially navigating spiritual disclosure, this participant’s experience significantly broadens current understandings of identity management theories to include spiritual awakening narratives.

Collectively, these narratives expand our understanding of the psychosocial dimensions influencing the disclosure or concealment of spiritually transformative experiences. They underscore not only external pressures of social stigma but also internal, often subconscious, fears rooted in historical and psychological factors. Such insights challenge simplistic interpretations of spiritual experiences as universally positive or easily communicated, positioning the articulation of spiritual experiences within a broader framework of personal, social, and cultural considerations.

3.6. Study 2

3.6.1. Analytical method

To complement the interpretivist findings from the qualitative interviews, a QCA was conducted using case-level data derived from the 13 interviewees. Thirteen case histories were constructed, and each served as an analytical unit in the QCA. As a configurational method, QCA offers a middle ground between qualitative depth and a degree of generalizability by systematically comparing patterns across cases (Crilly, 2011; Overall, 2016, 2025; Overall and Wise, 2016). Underpinned by Boolean algebra, QCA is well-suited for analyzing complex causality, where multiple conditions interact in producing an outcome such as kensho-related post-awakening awareness (Crilly, 2011). Similar to independent and dependent variables in quantitative methodologies, QCA distinguishes between causal conditions (input variables) and the outcome condition (Overall and Wise, 2016; Overall, 2025b).

QCA unfolds in four distinct stages. First, data calibration was undertaken using binary indicators to classify cases into full membership (1) or non-membership (0) in

particular sets (Crilly et al., 2012). Calibration extended across all input variables, ensuring comparability across cases (Overall and Wise, 2016). In the second stage, the Quine-McCluskey truth table was generated using fs/QCA software. This table systematically identifies all logically possible combinations of conditions that may yield the outcome (Crilly, 2011; Fiss, 2011). With six input variables, there are 2^6 logically possible configurations. In the truth table, there are values attributed to each combination of input variables that contribute to a kensho, with some containing several cases, others with just a few, and some with none (Fiss, 2011). Only configurations with empirical representation—those that matched participant data—were retained. Logical remainders, which lack empirical instances, were excluded in accordance with best practice guidelines (Crilly et al., 2012; Overall and Wise, 2016).

The third step employed Boolean minimization to simplify the truth table using logical reduction techniques. This enabled identification of necessary and sufficient combinations of input conditions that contribute to heightened awareness of struggle in life after kensho (Fiss, 2007; Grandori and Furnari, 2008). This step enabled the detection of patterns among the complex configurations that may not be immediately visible through thematic analysis alone.

In the final step, the results were interpreted using measures of consistency and coverage. Consistency, ranging from 0 to 1, reflects the degree to which similar cases yield the same outcome, functioning analogously to reliability (Crilly, 2011). As noted by Greckhamer (2011), consistency values exceeding 0.8 are considered to indicate robust relationships between conditions and outcomes. Conversely, values below 0.75 tend to be regarded with caution. Coverage, also ranging from 0 to 1, estimates the explanatory reach of a causal configuration—similar to the coefficient of determination in regression analysis (Crilly et al., 2012). When multiple configurations contribute to an outcome, unique coverage is used to determine the singular influence of each (Fiss, 2007). The configuration with the highest overall solution coverage is considered the strongest explanatory model (Overall, 2016, 2025; Overall and Wise, 2016). Greckhamer (2011, p. 94) provides the following description of the three types of coverage, namely raw, unique, and solution:

Overall coverage of a combination that may overlap with other combinations is its raw coverage; coverage uniquely due to a combination is its unique coverage (the difference between raw and unique coverage is due to overlap between combinations); the combined coverage of all combinations leading to the outcome is the solution coverage.

3.6.2. Measures

The six input variables in this study included the ego versus natural state, kensho is fleeting, positive life changes, importance of continued mindfulness practice, never shared kensho experience with anyone, and hesitant to share kensho experience. These variables were selected as potential contributors to participants' post-kensho awareness of psychological and existential struggle. To calibrate the data, each transcript was re-reviewed, and scores were manually assigned to each case using fuzzy-set logic. This allowed for greater granularity than a binary approach. Scores ranged between 0 and 1, resembling a Likert-like scaling format (e.g., 0.0, 0.1, 0.2, ..., 1.0), where 1.0 signified full membership and 0.0 indicated full non-membership in a

given set (Crilly et al., 2012; Overall, 2016; Overall and Wise, 2016). Calibration was conducted through direct engagement with raw interview data, using the above method to assign scores that reflected the degree to which each participant embodied a given input condition. This process allowed for the application of fuzzy-set QCA (fs/QCA), providing nuanced analysis of partial memberships across sets and enabling the retention of case-specific detail.

3.6.3. Data analysis

Using fs/QCA software, a truth table was constructed to identify the causal pathways leading to post-kensho awareness of struggle (Crilly, 2011). The conditions examined—the ego versus natural state, kensho is fleeting, positive life changes, importance of continued mindfulness practice, never shared kensho experience with anyone, and hesitant to share kensho experience—were treated as core causal elements, each hypothesized to play a critical role (Fiss, 2011). A consistency threshold of 0.8 was adopted, consistent with recommendations in the literature (Crilly, 2011; Fiss, 2011). The fs/QCA analysis yielded three solutions: complex, parsimonious, and intermediate. Following scholarly recommendations (Ragin and Sonnett, 2007), the intermediate solution was selected for interpretation as it balances analytic simplicity with sensitivity to contextual complexity (Crilly et al., 2012; Overall, 2016, 2025). Initial exploratory analyses suggested that ‘positive life changes’ did not meet the 0.8 consistency threshold and was thus excluded from the final model. This indicates that while participants described positive transformation, such changes were not central to explaining their heightened awareness of struggle post-kensho.

3.6.4. Results

Fuzzy-set calibration scores for all input variables across the 13 cases are presented in **Table 3**. The configurations that contribute to heightened post-kensho awareness of struggle are shown in **Table 4**. The strongest explanatory model included the presence of ego versus natural state and the absence of hesitancy to share kensho experience, never sharing kensho experience with anyone, kensho being fleeting, and the importance of continued mindfulness practice. This model yielded a consistency score of 1, with raw and unique coverage of 0.077 and an overall solution consistency and coverage score of 1.0.

According to accepted methodological standards, this solution is considered highly reliable (Crilly, 2011; Fiss, 2011). These results suggest that the awareness of struggle in life following kensho is most likely when egoic tendencies persist and are not counterbalanced by sustained mindfulness, willingness to share the experience, or enduring contact with the kensho state. This implies that although struggle remains, it becomes more consciously recognized in the presence of ego and the absence of integration-supportive practices. In other words, the very nature and presence of ego often contribute to struggle (i.e., suffering). The experience of kensho, in this case, appears to provide greater awareness of when the ego is present and when it is not. This is surprising because it contradicts the assumption that spiritual experiences automatically result in clarity or ease; instead, it appears that without continued practice and expression, awakening alone is insufficient for transformation.

Table 3. Calibration table for qualitative comparative analysis.

Name	The ego versus natural state	Awareness of struggles	Kensho is fleeting	Positive life changes	Importance of continued mindfulness practice	Never shared kensho experience with anyone	Hesitant to share kensho experience
Interviewee #1	1	0.9	0.7	1	0.9	0.4	0.4
Interviewee #2	0.9	0.8	0.7	0.9	0.6		0
Interviewee #3	0.8	0.9	0.8	1	1	0.1	0.2
Interviewee #4	0.8	0.8		0.7	1	0.5	0.5
Interviewee #5		0.9		0.8	0.7	0	0
Interviewee #6	0.9	1	0.8	1	0.7	0.2	0.6
Interviewee #7	0.9		0.9		0.9	0.3	0.4
Interviewee #8	0.8	0.9	0.7	0.8	0.9	0.5	0.6
Interviewee #9	0.9	1	0.8	0.9	0.9	0.2	0.3
Interviewee #10	1		0.7	0.9	1	0	0
Interviewee #11	0.8	1	0.8	0.9	0.8	0.2	0.3
Interviewee #12	1	0.8	0.9	1	0.8	0.1	0.5
Interviewee #13	0.9	0.8	0.9	0.8	0.7	0.4	0.5

Table 4. Configuration of causal conditions leading to awareness of struggles.

Configurations for awareness of struggles	
Causal conditions	1
The ego versus natural state	●
Hesitant to share kensho experience	⊗
Never shared kensho experience with anyone	⊗
Kensho is fleeting	⊗
Importance of continued mindfulness practice	⊗
Consistency	1
Raw coverage	0.077
Unique coverage	0.077
Overall solution consistency	1
Overall solution coverage	1

Key: ● core causal condition (present); ⊗ core causal condition (absent).

Note: This format of presenting the results of the fuzzy-set analysis is based on Ragin and Fiss (2008).

4. General discussion

The findings presented in this study offer several novel contributions to the existing literature on spiritual awakening and post-kensho integration. They advance current theoretical discourse by challenging static models of enlightenment, introducing new insights into the role of mindfulness in sustaining transformation, and illuminating the psychosocial complexities that shape the aftermath of awakening. Collectively, these contributions refine prevailing frameworks within transpersonal psychology, contemplative science, and the broader study of spiritual experience.

4.1. Awakening as the beginning—Not the culmination—Of psychological and spiritual integration

A central contribution of this study is its nuanced reconceptualization of kensho not as a definitive endpoint, but as the beginning of an embodied and psychologically complex integration process. While much of the existing literature—particularly in the domains of mysticism and transpersonal psychology—treats spiritual awakening as a climactic shift toward transcendence, participants in this study emphasized the persistence of egoic structures, self-doubt, and trauma after the event. For instance, Interviewee #11 noted, “The ego hides in the body sometimes,” while Interviewee #4 described “self-doubt” that remained deeply embedded even after the kensho. These reflections directly challenge prevailing frameworks that depict awakening as a decisive rupture from suffering or psychological conflict (James, 1902; Taylor, 2017). Instead, they suggest that awakening often heightens sensitivity to unresolved psychological material and deepens awareness of suffering, rather than eradicating it.

This perspective enriches and extends prior theoretical work in transpersonal psychology, particularly that of Cortright (2010), who emphasizes the need for integration and embodiment following spiritual openings. However, while Cortright and others focus on the therapeutic aftermath of awakening, the participants in this study suggest that kensho itself catalyzes a process of embodied reckoning—a dynamic dance between insight and the return of familiar egoic patterns. This complicates overly linear or binary models of awakening (pre- vs. post-transformation) by emphasizing continuity, fluidity, and oscillation. The findings also resonate with process-oriented developmental models (e.g., Cook-Greuter (2000)), which argue for non-linear spiritual evolution through cycles of expansion and contraction. Yet the lived phenomenology presented here—especially the sense of fading presence, emotional reactivation, and subtle egoic resurgence—offers rare empirical insight into these abstract models.

This study also refines existing assumptions within the psychology of religion and spirituality, where awakening is sometimes assumed to correspond to permanent traits (Hood et al., 2009). By foregrounding participants’ direct experiences of fluctuation and impermanence, the research introduces a model of awakening-as-practice rather than awakening-as-state. The implication is profound: the kensho may unveil the ‘natural state’, but the real work begins in its aftermath—in the disintegration, reformation, and reintegration of selfhood. This shifts the scholarly conversation away from the mystique of sudden enlightenment toward a more grounded understanding of spiritual maturation as an enduring psychological process.

4.2. The role of mindfulness and ongoing practice in stabilizing post-awakening integration

Another major contribution of this research is the empirically grounded insight that sustained mindfulness practices—such as meditation, self-inquiry, and somatic awareness—are not supplementary but foundational for the integration of spiritual awakening. Participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of continued mindfulness practice in preserving and deepening the insights gained through kensho. Interviewee #3, for example, noted that aspects of ego “never go away” and require

continuous observation and discernment. This extends prevailing research on mindfulness by illustrating its critical role not merely in cultivating well-being (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Shapiro et al., 2006), but in anchoring transpersonal states into everyday consciousness after profound spiritual openings.

Much of the existing literature on spiritual experience tends to focus on the awakening event itself—its phenomenology, antecedents, or neurocognitive correlates (Hood, 2001; Newberg and Waldman, 2009). Less attention is given to the maintenance and regulation of such states. This study fills that gap by identifying mindfulness not only as a method of returning to the awakened state (as noted by Interviewee #6) but also as a discipline of purification that facilitates ego attenuation, emotional recalibration, and existential clarity. This aligns with, but significantly deepens, perspectives found in Zen literature, where mindfulness is portrayed as both a gateway and safeguard against egoic re-appropriation of spiritual insight (Suzuki, 1970).

Furthermore, participants did not frame mindfulness as a passive activity but rather as an active, vigilant engagement with arising thought patterns, emotional states, and bodily tensions—signaling a shift from event-based models of awakening to process-based frameworks. This insight enhances current understandings within both transpersonal psychology and contemplative neuroscience, suggesting that spiritual transformation may be sustained only through deliberate practices that reintegrate the mind-body system (Dahl et al., 2015; Lutz et al., 2008).

Importantly, participants portrayed mindfulness as a form of spiritual maintenance, which, if neglected, allows egoic patterns to resurface and diminish the benefits of awakening. This challenge widespread assumptions in popular spiritual narratives that awakening alone is transformative enough. Instead, this research proposes a refined model: kensho is catalytic, but mindfulness is curative—a finding with implications for therapeutic, spiritual, and clinical models alike.

4.3. Silence, stigma, and the social dynamics of sharing spiritual experiences

This study makes a distinctive contribution by illuminating the intrapersonal and sociocultural dynamics that inhibit individuals from sharing their kensho experiences. While prior literature has addressed the transformative potential of mystical or non-ordinary states (Hood, 2001; James, 1902), there remains a critical gap in understanding how social stigma, fear of misinterpretation, and concerns about ego inflation shape post-awakening silence. Interviewee #1, for instance, confessed, “I haven’t spoken about this to anyone,” highlighting not only the isolation that can follow awakening but also the therapeutic potential of disclosure. This finding reframes silence not as mere introspection but as a psychosocial coping strategy shaped by cultural, historical, and spiritual narratives.

While research in identity theory and selective disclosure (Chaudoir and Fisher, 2010) has focused on marginalized identities such as illness or sexuality, this study extends these insights into the realm of spiritual identity. Participants like Interviewee #7 described being “very careful” with whom they shared their experience, indicating the presence of perceived spiritual stigma—a construct that is rarely addressed in

transpersonal psychology. Furthermore, concerns about the “spiritual ego”—as articulated by Interviewee #1 and conceptualized by Masters (2010) and Fenner (2003)—complicate the internal experience of sharing, suggesting that fears of egoic co-optation may deter even private reflections, let alone public disclosures.

This dual pressure—from both external stigma and internal self-monitoring—forms a powerful silencing mechanism. Yet, paradoxically, Interviewee #1 also found integration through the very act of narrating the experience: “This interview has really helped me to see that it’s okay to talk about it.” This suggests that disclosure is not just cathartic but integrative, enabling individuals to contextualize, process, and stabilize their transformation. In this way, the findings extend current discussions in spiritual emergence theory and clinical psychology by showing that the act of speaking can serve as a form of healing—particularly in the wake of destabilizing spiritual experiences. Thus, this research introduces the novel concept of spiritually induced disclosure hesitancy, a construct that both intersects with and diverges from more general theories of stigma and concealment. It opens new avenues for therapeutic engagement, community building, and research on how spiritual identity is socially regulated and internally negotiated.

4.4. Kensho as a fleeting yet foundational phenomenon—Challenging static models of enlightenment

This research contributes significantly to the understanding of kensho as a transitory yet catalytic experience, challenging long-standing assumptions in both spiritual literature and psychology that frame awakening as a stable, enduring state. Participants repeatedly described their kensho as fleeting, elusive, and difficult to sustain. For example, Interviewee #13 likened their experience to a lucid dream—intensely vivid, yet ultimately impermanent. This contrasts with conventional portrayals in mysticism (James, 1902; Underhill, 1999) and popular spiritual discourse that idealize awakening as a permanent shift in identity or consciousness. Instead, the findings support a dynamic model where awakening opens the door to insight but does not prevent reabsorption into egoic or habitual patterns.

In doing so, the study advances theoretical models of spiritual development that emphasize oscillation and cyclical transformation, such as Cook-Greuter’s (2000) post-autonomous stages of development. Participants’ lived narratives—oscillating between clarity and confusion, lightness and doubt—add rich phenomenological depth to these models. They also align with recent neuroscientific research suggesting that mystical experiences are subject to neurobiological variability and do not always lead to enduring trait change without intentional integration (Newberg and Waldman, 2009).

Moreover, the study reveals a paradox: the diminishment of intensity over time is not experienced as a failure but as a deepening normalization of spiritual insight. As Interviewee #11 stated, “It’s not as dramatic,” yet the presence remained. This nuanced understanding reframes the waning of mystical states not as regression, but as maturation—a movement from peak to plateau, from rupture to reintegration. It suggests that intensity is not synonymous with spiritual progress and that the subtlety of post-kensho states may reflect deeper embodiment and refinement of awareness.

This insight challenges the teleological and romanticized tropes of spiritual literature, replacing them with a developmental, process-oriented framework grounded in real-world experiences. It invites scholars and practitioners to reconsider what enlightenment looks like in practice—not as an endpoint, but as an evolving relationship between clarity and contraction, presence and forgetting. This reframing has direct implications for spiritual guidance, integration programs, and psychological models that seek to accompany individuals through the long arc of transformation following kensho.

4.5. Ego as a persistent mechanism of suffering—And a mirror for awareness

The final contribution of this research lies in its reframing of ego not merely as an obstacle, but as a central reference point for the deepening of awareness. Across the qualitative and QCA findings, participants indicated that their struggles persisted post-kensho not because of spiritual failure, but because egoic patterns continued to reassert themselves—as in Interviewee #4’s reflections on self-doubt or Interviewee #3’s account of watching the ego “come in through a back door”. Rather than achieving freedom from ego, participants cultivated an increased sensitivity to its operations. This finding nuances dominant discourses in spiritual psychology that advocate for ego transcendence or dissolution (Wilber, 2007) by offering a model of egoic coexistence in which the awakened self does not eliminate ego but enters into an ongoing relationship with it.

This insight is sharpened by the QCA results, which revealed that heightened awareness of struggle was most likely when ego was present and not offset by integrative practices such as mindfulness or open sharing. This contradicts widespread assumptions that awakening produces immediate clarity or liberation. Instead, the presence of ego served as a mirror—an object of contemplation and a site of growth. Participants were not unaware of their suffering; they were increasingly able to witness it. This introduces a vital distinction between suffering that is unconscious and suffering that is consciously observed—what might be termed ‘aware suffering’.

In this sense, ego was no longer the antagonist but part of the terrain of awakening itself. This reframing challenges binary conceptions of self and non-self, suggesting that spiritual maturation may be marked not by ego’s absence, but by one’s ability to remain awake in its presence. It also expands existing literature on cognitive flexibility (Dahl et al., 2015) by showing that spiritual insight increases the capacity to recognize internal fragmentation without being consumed by it.

The theoretical implication is profound: ego does not block awakening; it reveals the work that awakening initiates. The practical implication is equally important: post-awakening support should not aim to eradicate ego but to help individuals navigate its reemergence skillfully. This contribution advances a more integrative, compassionate, and psychologically informed model of post-kensho life.

4.6. Implications for practice

The findings of this study carry important implications for clinical, therapeutic, and spiritual care practices. First, the reconceptualization of kensho as the beginning

of an integration process—rather than its culmination—underscores the need for post-awakening support structures. Clinicians, spiritual directors, and integration facilitators should be trained to recognize that spiritual awakenings can heighten psychological sensitivity, reactivate unresolved trauma, and amplify egoic patterns. Support should focus not on pathologizing these reactions but on normalizing and contextualizing them within a developmental arc of spiritual maturation.

Second, the empirical identification of mindfulness as a stabilizing force suggests that continued contemplative practice is not optional but essential in post-kensho life. Practitioners working with awakened individuals should encourage structured mindfulness, self-inquiry, or somatic tracking as ongoing disciplines that anchor insight and regulate emotional volatility. These practices can serve as protective factors against spiritual bypassing or re-traumatization. Third, the documented hesitation to share awakening experiences—due to fears of stigma or spiritual ego—signals a critical need for confidential, nonjudgmental environments where individuals can articulate and integrate these experiences. Therapeutic spaces should be attuned to “disclosure hesitancy” and promote narrative processing as a form of healing.

Finally, the study highlights ego as a continuing reference point for awareness. Rather than aiming to dissolve the ego entirely, practitioners should foster clients’ capacity to relate to egoic processes with curiosity and discernment. This approach supports a non-dual therapeutic orientation that affirms both transcendence and psychological integration as equally vital components of spiritual growth.

4.7. Limitations and future directions

While this study offers important theoretical and empirical contributions to the understanding of post-kensho experience, several limitations warrant acknowledgement. First, the qualitative findings are based on a relatively small, self-selecting sample of individuals who retrospectively reported their spiritual awakenings in the context of a specific retreat format. As such, the transferability of insights may be limited by contextual, cultural, and experiential specificity. Although the depth of phenomenological data supports conceptual saturation, future research may benefit from a more diverse sample, including individuals from varying spiritual traditions, geographies, and demographic backgrounds, to examine whether similar post-awakening dynamics emerge across contexts.

Second, while QCA offers a powerful method for examining configurational causality, the modest number of cases reduces the complexity of patterns that can be reliably identified. A larger QCA dataset would enable the identification of higher-order configurations, test the stability of causal patterns across subgroups, and improve the generalizability of the solution space through robustness testing (Fiss, 2011). Additionally, a greater number of cases would allow for integration with complementary quantitative techniques, such as structural equation modeling (SEM), thereby linking the configurational logic of QCA with the latent variable modeling strengths of psychometrics. As such, the results presented here should be interpreted as generative rather than exhaustive. Future studies would benefit from scaling this work across broader spiritual populations to empirically test whether the post-kensho dynamics of egoic struggle, mindfulness continuity, and expressive sharing remain

consistent across more heterogeneous cohorts. Finally, there remains a pressing need to investigate the clinical and therapeutic implications of spiritual awakening, particularly as more individuals report such experiences in secular or psychedelic contexts. Future research should consider how practitioners, therapists, and spiritual communities can better support individuals navigating the often-disorienting terrain of post-awakening life.

Informed consent statement: In accordance with the Canadian Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2), research participants were provided with a participant information letter outlining the details of the study, their rights, and obligations. Participants provided their informed consent to participate in this study.

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Appendix

List of semi-structured interview questions:

- (1) Take me back to the moment of kensho. What happened to you?
- (2) Any psychedelic use while on retreat? Any psychedelic use in your life prior to the retreat?
- (3) How was your life pre-kensho?
- (4) How was your mental health pre-kensho?
- (5) Any repressed trauma experiences? Pre- and post-kensho?
- (6) Have you relied on psychotherapy to help you integrate your experiences?
- (7) With the insight gained, talk about your ego pre-kensho. Would you classify your ego as 'big' or 'small'?
- (8) Has your life changed post-kensho?
- (9) What has been the role of your ego post-kensho?
- (10) Have you had any other spiritual awakenings prior to your kensho?
- (11) Have you had any other spiritual awakenings after your kensho?