

Embodied insight and ontological peace: A mixed-methods study of kensho spiritual awakenings

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Abstract: To advance the empirical study of spiritual transformation, this article offers a two-part investigation into the lived experience of kensho spiritual awakenings. The first study applies grounded theory to in-depth interviews with 13 participants who underwent kensho experiences during facilitated retreat settings. The analysis identified three inductively derived categories—(1) inner peace, (2) big release, and (3) heightened senses—each encompassing affective, cognitive, and somatic dimensions of awakening. The second study employs fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fs/QCA) to examine the causal configurations associated with two central outcomes: inner peace and trusting in the unknown. The inner peace configuration included karmic processing, heightened sensory awareness, and inner guidance, while the trust configuration involved sensory awareness, inner guidance, and physical sensation. These findings indicate that spiritual awakening is not solely a cognitive realization but an embodied and relational reconfiguration of experience, emerging through the interaction of somatic intensity, attentional processes, and intuitive orientation. Importantly, the results highlight overlooked dynamics in the awakening process, including the role of simplicity as a core experiential feature, the epistemic significance of sensory awareness, and the function of karmic activation in facilitating transformation. By integrating grounded theory and QCA, this study offers a methodologically innovative and conceptually nuanced contribution to transpersonal psychology and contemplative science.

Keywords: self-inquiry; kensho spiritual awakening; spiritual awakening; enlightenment intensive; iboga micro-dose

1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a resurgence of interest in spiritual development, mystical experience, and consciousness-expanding practices across both secular and religious populations (Taylor, 2017; Overall, 2020, 2021, 2025). This shift is reflected in growing engagement with contemplative and introspective practices, alongside increasing reports of spiritually transformative experiences characterized by ego dissolution, expanded awareness, and shifts in identity (Luke, 2022). These experiences are no longer confined to esoteric or monastic traditions, but are increasingly emerging through structured retreats, relational contemplative practices, and other contemporary modalities that aim to facilitate direct experiential insight.

Spiritual awakenings—whether gradual or sudden—are often characterized by fundamental shifts in perception, identity, and embodiment (James, 2004). Among the most significant yet underexplored of these transformations is kensho, a Japanese Zen term denoting an initial glimpse into one’s true nature (Overall, 2025). While

historically rooted in monastic Zen practice, contemporary adaptations—such as the Charles Berner self-inquiry dyad protocol—have expanded its accessibility by integrating contemplative introspection with structured interpersonal dialogue (Overall, 2025). These approaches aim not only to cultivate insight, but to disrupt habitual egoic patterns, enabling direct experiential engagement with deeper modes of awareness.

Despite growing interest, the lived experience of awakening—particularly its sensory, emotional, and embodied dimensions—remains insufficiently examined in empirical research (Overall, 2025). Existing accounts frequently reference phenomena such as somatic intensity, trust in the unknown, and experiences of unity or emotional release (Taylor and Egeto-Szabo, 2017), yet these elements are often excluded from dominant psychological frameworks due to their non-ordinary or non-verbal characteristics (Grof, 1985; Ferrer, 2002). As a result, the phenomenological texture of awakening—how it unfolds in the body, how it is experienced emotionally, and how individuals interpret these shifts in consciousness—remains underdeveloped in the literature.

Contemporary debates in cognitive science increasingly challenge disembodied models of cognition, emphasizing instead that cognitive processes are shaped by dynamic interactions between brain, body, and environment (Varela et al., 1991; Thompson, 2007). In this study, cognition is therefore understood to include not only discursive and analytical processes, but also embodied, pre-reflective, and experiential modes of knowing. Correspondingly, embodiment refers to the integration of cognitive, affective, and sensorimotor processes through which experience is constituted, rather than being limited to somatic sensation alone.

This gap is particularly evident in the study of kensho, which is often framed as a doctrinal or metaphysical insight rather than a phenomenological event. Consequently, key embodied and affective dimensions—including how the experience emerges, stabilizes, and is integrated—remain insufficiently explored (Combs, 2002; Lindahl et al., 2017). In addition, relational approaches such as the Charles Berner self-inquiry dyad protocol introduce an interpersonal dimension to awakening, suggesting that shifts in awareness may be shaped through dialogical and co-regulated processes rather than occurring solely within the individual.

To address this gap, this research presents a two-part empirical investigation into the lived experience of kensho. Drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews with 13 individuals who experienced kensho during facilitated retreat settings, the first study employs grounded theory to examine the phenomenological dimensions of awakening. The second study builds on these insights using qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) to identify configurations associated with two core outcomes: inner peace and trust in the unknown. Together, these studies shift the focus from abstract models of enlightenment to embodied and relational dimensions of awakening, offering a methodologically integrated contribution to the literature.

2. Literature review

2.1. Kensho spiritual awakening

Kensho, derived from Zen Buddhist traditions, refers to a direct experiential insight into the true nature of the self—a momentary but profound realization of nonduality, often described as ‘seeing into one’s own nature’ (Suzuki, 1970). Unlike satori, which connotes a deeper or more stabilized awakening, kensho is generally viewed as an initial entry point into enlightened awareness (Overall, 2025). Historically, this concept has served as a foundational element within Rinzai Zen, emphasizing sudden, embodied insight achieved through disciplined practice and psychospiritual intensity (Yampolsky, 1967). Zen traditions have long stressed that such awakening is not the end but the beginning of sustained integration through continued zazen, koan study, and ethical action (Cleary, 1995). Kensho differs from visionary or transcendental states commonly found in other contemplative systems in that it emphasizes immediacy, simplicity, and paradox—free of mental fabrication or metaphysical speculation (Kapleau, 1989).

In contemporary settings, kensho is increasingly studied outside of monastic contexts and recognized as a spontaneous or induced psychospiritual breakthrough. Scholars have documented a rise in kensho-like experiences among individuals undergoing meditation retreats, psychedelic sessions, or intense psychological crises (Taylor, 2017). These contemporary awakenings may mirror traditional phenomenology, yet they unfold amid modern cultural, psychological, and therapeutic frameworks. Recent empirical work has begun to frame kensho through transpersonal and psychological lenses, analyzing it as a non-pathological, potentially transformative altered state of consciousness (Overall, 2025, 2026). This marks a significant departure from early psychiatric models that pathologized spiritual episodes, especially when they involved perceptual shifts or ego dissolution (Grof and Grof, 1990). Instead, researchers now emphasize the potential for such experiences to catalyze long-term well-being, existential reorientation, and post-traumatic growth (Perry, 1999).

Antecedents of kensho vary across traditions and empirical accounts. In classical Zen, antecedents include years of disciplined meditation, psychological surrender, and cognitive koan breakdowns designed to deconstruct dualistic perception (Heine, 1994). In more contemporary studies, however, antecedents appear more diverse, including exposure to nature, intense emotional events, breathwork, prior history of spiritual awakenings, childhood mystical experiences (Overall, 2025), and entheogenic substances (Taylor, 2013). In these contexts, what remains consistent is the presence of a ‘rupture’ in ordinary consciousness—typically preceded by a state of inner destabilization or cognitive dissonance, leading to a sudden perceptual clarity. This resonates with earlier theoretical models of spiritual emergence that emphasize the integration of unconscious material and the loosening of egoic structures (Washburn, 1995).

The outcomes of kensho are similarly complex. While the immediate experience is often characterized by peace, joy, and a sense of unity, long-term outcomes depend heavily on the individual’s integration process and psychosocial context. For some, the

awakening dissolves prior trauma narratives and reorients the individual toward greater compassion, presence, and equanimity. Others may experience disorientation, loss of meaning, or existential confusion in the aftermath—an effect sometimes described as ‘spiritual destabilization’ (Taylor and Egeto-Szabo, 2017). The ambiguity of these outcomes emphasizes the importance of post-kensho support structures, including mentorship, spiritual community, and somatic integration practices.

2.2. The experience of spiritual awakening

The phenomenology of spiritual awakening has been extensively documented across religious, psychological, and clinical contexts. In both traditional contemplative frameworks and contemporary empirical literature, spiritual awakenings are described as sudden, often unanticipated shifts in consciousness accompanied by a profound transformation in how individuals perceive themselves, reality, and their place in the world (Taylor, 2012). Although these experiences vary widely in content and intensity, several thematic features recur consistently across studies, including altered self-referentiality, somatic activation, emotional release, and enduring psychospiritual change.

Empirical studies exploring the subjective experience of awakening frequently highlight the collapse of dualistic frameworks and the perception of a unified or ‘suchness’ quality of reality. Participants often describe these moments as imbued with clarity, timelessness, and a sense of having touched something fundamentally real (Taylor and Egeto-Szabo, 2017). In the case of kensho, individuals report a radical and often unspeakable intimacy with the present moment, accompanied by a dissolution of linguistic and conceptual structures (Kapleau, 1989; Combs, 2002). While western models of altered states have emphasized dramatic visual or auditory changes, the awakening experience is often more subtle — marked not by the presence of novel content but by the absence of filtering processes that typically structure ordinary perception. Neurophenomenological research supports this account, suggesting that awakening experiences often correlate with reduced activity in the default mode network (DMN), implicating diminished self-referential thinking and increased present-centered awareness (Brewer et al., 2011).

Contrary to interpretations that frame spiritual insight as a purely cognitive realization, numerous empirical reports describe surrender as arising from and with the body—through trembling, tears, convulsions, or energetic expansions (Taylor, 2017). Trust in these contexts is not an abstract act of faith but a visceral submission to something ineffable yet experientially real. This somatic dimension is especially relevant in spiritual emergencies or spontaneous awakenings, where individuals describe intense physical sensations—such as shaking, heat, pressure, or spontaneous movement—paired with a simultaneous sense of being held or guided by an unseen force (Grof and Grof, 1990; Overall and Rosalind, 2022). In these instances, surrender to the unknown is intimately linked to the body’s capacity to tolerate, express, and integrate extreme energetic intensities (Lukoff, 2007). Such phenomena resonate with descriptions of kundalini awakening in yogic traditions, where spiritual realization is activated through the release and transformation of stored bioenergetic or psychic

material (Sannella, 1992).

Accompanying the surrender to the unknown is the frequent emergence of profound inner peace—another hallmark of spiritual awakening. This peace is typically described not as the absence of conflict but as a deep, abiding stillness that remains unperturbed by mental or emotional fluctuations (Taylor, 2012). In Zen accounts of *kensho*, such peace is portrayed as intrinsic to one's original nature, unveiled rather than acquired through effort (Suzuki, 1970). Empirical findings suggest that this peace is often experienced as somatic ease, affective clarity, and a cessation of internal striving (Taylor and Egeto-Szabo, 2017). Neuroscientific studies have noted that such experiences are associated with increased parasympathetic activity and heart rate variability, suggesting that inner peace may be rooted not only in altered cognition but in autonomic regulation (Wahbeh et al., 2018). Importantly, this peace does not preclude emotional expression but seems to offer a deeper container in which such expression becomes fluid, non-attached, and integrated into a larger field of awareness (Ferrer, 2002).

Another recurring feature within the literature—particularly in studies integrating Buddhist and yogic psychology—is the surfacing and processing of karmic patterns during or immediately after awakening. Karma, broadly understood as the residues of past actions, impressions, or attachments, is often reported as becoming conscious in the form of re-emerging memories, behavioural compulsions, or emotional intensities (Feuerstein, 1998; Daniels, 2005). Rather than bypassing these karmic residues, many participants describe the awakening event as a catalyst for their direct confrontation. The process may involve reliving traumatic material, engaging in ritualized release, or undergoing spontaneous cathartic episodes (Taylor, 2013). Empirical studies on spiritually transformative experiences have confirmed that such confrontations often unfold without therapeutic prompting and can be overwhelming unless adequately supported (Lindahl et al., 2017). Still, several researchers argue that the processing of karma during awakening can lead to long-term psychological healing, as individuals reinterpret past suffering from a non-egoic vantage point (Lukoff, 2007).

2.3. Charles Berner self-inquiry dyad protocol

The Charles Berner self-inquiry dyad protocol represents a novel synthesis of eastern contemplative traditions and western therapeutic communication models, uniquely designed to facilitate direct insight into the nature of self and reality. Developed in the 1960s by Charles Berner, the dyad method was conceived as a modern spiritual technology aimed at accelerating enlightenment through structured interpersonal inquiry (Berner, 2013). Its foundational roots draw heavily on Zen koan practice, Advaita Vedanta self-inquiry (*ātma-vicāra*), and phenomenologically oriented western approaches such as Gestalt therapy and client-centered communication (Grof and Grof, 1990). Rather than promoting solitary meditation, the protocol situates awakening as an intersubjective process, thereby aligning with participatory models of spirituality that emphasize relational contexts for transformation (Ferrer, 2002).

At its core, the protocol involves two participants sitting across from each other, alternating roles as 'inquirer' and 'witness' in timed five-minute intervals, repeated over

a 40-minute dyad. The central instruction, often a variation of ‘tell me who you are’, is designed to evoke direct, non-conceptual awareness through persistent introspection and articulation. The witness remains silent and non-reactive, creating a safe container for the communicator to engage in deep inquiry without interruption, feedback, or evaluative response. This structure is designed to bypass habitual cognitive filters and social defenses, enabling the communicator to encounter and express increasingly subtle dimensions of self-awareness. The formalized turn-taking format also mirrors aspects of mindfulness and presence cultivation, as each role requires full attention and non-reactivity—qualities essential to spiritual insight across contemplative traditions (Gunaratana, 2011).

Empirical studies have begun to assess the efficacy of the self-inquiry dyad method, with findings suggesting a measurable impact on psychological well-being, interpersonal connectedness, and states of nondual awareness (Overall, 2025). Overall (2025), for example, conducted a mixed-methods study in which participants who engaged in repeated dyad inquiry over several days reported increases in subjective well-being, clarity of self-perception, and peak experiences akin to spiritual awakening. These outcomes were not only self-reported but also observed through behavioural changes in affect regulation and interpersonal authenticity.

The dyad’s unique intersubjective structure may also enhance self-awareness by disrupting the DMN (Brewer et al., 2011). While most meditation techniques reduce DMN activity through internal attention, the dyad’s externalized focus—speaking and listening—may modulate self-processing through novel neural pathways, combining introspection with social co-regulation. Although specific neuroimaging studies on the Berner protocol remain limited, early-stage research in interpersonal mindfulness contexts suggests that such practices can modulate activity in the medial prefrontal cortex and posterior cingulate cortex—regions associated with ego function and self-concept (van Lutterveld et al., 2017).

In terms of its application to awakening, several qualitative and longitudinal studies have noted the dyad’s capacity to catalyze kensho-type experiences, particularly when used in intensive retreat settings (Overall, 2025). Participants frequently report non-conceptual insight, emotional catharsis, and altered somatic states during or immediately after dyad sessions. These experiences are often described using the same phenomenological markers found in classical accounts of awakening: dissolution of the egoic boundary, timeless awareness, and a direct perception of reality as it is (Combs, 2002). Such findings align with Berner’s original claim that the dyad could facilitate enlightenment within a 3–7-day retreat format—an assertion increasingly explored through modern empirical scrutiny (Berner, 2013).

Importantly, the dyad’s capacity to stimulate awakening appears contingent on a combination of factors, including the intention of the practitioner, the safety of the interpersonal container, and the repetitive nature of the inquiry prompt (Taylor, 2017). This suggests that the method’s efficacy lies not in any singular component but in its systemic structure—a carefully calibrated interplay between existential questioning, vulnerability, and relational witnessing. In this respect, the Berner dyad represents a distinctive contribution to the field of spiritual practices, offering a

replicable, intersubjective pathway to kensho that bridges traditional and contemporary frameworks.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study 1

To explore the phenomenology of kensho spiritual awakenings, this study adopted an interpretivist framework incorporating grounded theory techniques to analyze the interview data of 13 individuals who reported undergoing such experiences. Unlike classical grounded theory designs, which advocate for simultaneous data collection and analysis in an iterative manner (Bryman and Teevan, 2005), this study departed from the constant comparative method. Instead, data collection and analysis were temporally separated, such that no analytical procedures were undertaken until all interviews had been completed (Overall and Wise, 2016). Upon concluding the final interview, data analysis commenced through open and axial coding procedures as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

In alignment with rigorous qualitative approaches, data were systematically deconstructed into thematic units to facilitate conceptual abstraction. The coding process was conducted using Microsoft Word's comment and colour-coding features, which enabled the iterative development, merging, and elimination of codes (Overall and Wise, 2016). This method enhanced analytic clarity and allowed for the grouping of meaningfully similar ideas across the data set, enabling the emergence of salient patterns reflective of participants' subjective interpretations.

3.2. Data analysis

The 13 participants were selected based on their reported experiences of kensho during a structured retreat program centered on the Charles Berner self-inquiry dyad method. Retreat facilitators, who possessed decades of experience with this contemplative protocol, curated a list of individuals who had demonstrably experienced a kensho event during these intensives. It is important to note that kensho experiences are typically spontaneous, non-linear, and highly individualized. As such, they present considerable challenges for replication in controlled research environments (Taylor, 2017). While methodologies such as the Berner dyad may cultivate conducive conditions for such awakenings, they do not impose uniform outcomes due to the idiosyncratic and contextual nature of spiritual transformation (Hood, 2021).

All interviews were semi-structured and conducted via Zoom, with durations averaging approximately 60 min. A complete list of interview prompts is included in the **Appendix A**. Interviews took place between three months and two years following the retreat experiences, with one participant interviewed 15 years post-retreat. While such extended recall periods may raise concerns regarding memory reliability, existing research in cognitive neuroscience suggests that emotionally salient, self-defining events—especially those involving altered states of consciousness—are more likely to be retained with vividness and accuracy over time (Conway et al., 2004).

To further mitigate the risk of recall bias, participants were guided through

a series of somatic and cognitive priming exercises prior to the formal interview process. Specifically, breathwork techniques were used to activate the parasympathetic nervous system and induce a theta brainwave state—conditions that are associated with increased introspective access and enhanced memory retrieval. These preparatory methods aimed to optimize the psychological state of participants to facilitate deeper recall of the kensho event. All research procedures were conducted in accordance with the Canadian Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2). Participants were provided with detailed consent forms and informed of their rights prior to participation.

The analytic process began with a close reading of each of the 13 interview transcripts. Employing open coding techniques, every line of each transcript was assigned one or more interpretive codes in accordance with established qualitative research procedures (Silverman, 2008). This stage of coding yielded a total of 1,090 unique codes. A frequency analysis was subsequently performed to identify recurring linguistic and conceptual patterns, based on the premise that repetition serves as an indicator of conceptual salience (Overall and Wise, 2016). This analysis led to the identification of emergent themes associated with the kensho experience, including profound feelings of peace, beauty, love, and oneness with everything; trust in the unknown; and a reliance on inner guidance (see **Table 1**).

Table 1. Open-coding examples.

Kensho themes	Total frequency of response	% of 13 respondents
Feeling of peace, beauty, love, one-ness with everything	73	100
Various modalities	21	100
Dyads	15	100
Trusting in the unknown	20	85
Used Iboga during retreat	11	85
Release from traumas and/or intense emotions	18	85
Struck by simplicity of kensho experience	22	77
Heightened sense of awareness, the 5 senses and beyond	18	77
Listening to inner guidance	15	69
Questioning by mind, in and out of kensho	17	62
Very tired and/or frustrated	14	54
Addressing triggers/karma/samskara as they come up	8	46
Physical sensations	9	46

Following open coding, axial coding was employed to recontextualize the data by identifying interrelations among the emergent themes (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). As defined by Strauss and Corbin (1990), axial coding involves “putting the data back together in new ways by making connections between categories” (p. 96). This phase of analysis enabled the integration of themes both within individual transcripts and across the broader data set (Silverman, 2008; Overall and Wise, 2016). Through this process, three overarching categories were inductively constructed from the data, namely: (1) inner peace, (2) big release, and (3) heightened senses (see **Table 2**). Each of these categories, and their constituent themes are discussed in the following sections with empirical illustration and theoretical integration.

Table 2. Axial codes.

Kensho categories	Themes
Inner peace	(1) Feeling of peace, beauty, love, oneness with everything, (2) Struck by simplicity of kensho experience.
Big release	(1) Release from traumas and/or intense emotions, (2) Questioning by mind, in and out of kensho, (3) Very tired and/or frustrated, (4) Addressing triggers/karma/samskara as they come up.
Heightened senses	(1) Trusting in the unknown, (2) Heightened sense of awareness, the 5 senses, and beyond, (3) Listening to inner guidance, (4) Physical sensations.

3.3. Inner peace

3.3.1. Feeling of peace, beauty, love, oneness with everything

Many participants described an overwhelming sense of peace, unity, and beauty that emerged during their kensho. These accounts suggest a transition into a qualitatively distinct mode of awareness, where ordinary experience was reframed through a lens of radical simplicity and interconnectedness. One participant captured this transformation vividly:

There was just this oneness. You could call it a dream, an exploration, or a creation. But the only truth was that there was one. And for a few months, I just couldn't deal with it in a sense because my mind couldn't wrap around it. And then it's just like, well, that's just something the mind can't deal with. So that's okay. So I just have to accept that I have another way of knowing and another knowledge that's not through the mind.

Interviewee #2

Here, the kensho experience is articulated as an ontological shift—one that reveals unity as the underlying structure of reality. The participant's inability to "wrap around it" with the mind reflects a destabilization of epistemological norms, suggesting that the awakening introduced an embodied, non-conceptual mode of knowing. This aligns with findings in transpersonal psychology, where mystical states are often described as "noetic", imparting a sense of truth that transcends discursive reasoning (James, 2004; Grof, 1988). The emergence of "another knowledge" outside of rational cognition resonates with Buddhist epistemology, particularly Zen notions of direct insight (satori) that bypass conceptual elaboration (Suzuki, 1970).

Another participant described this transformation in terms of emotional and physical release:

It was just like stepping out of something and into something else... The most pronounced change that I can really remember is a sense of calmness. And like you were carrying a thousand-pound weight that you didn't realize, and then you just put it down internally and then felt how much lighter you feel after that.

Interviewee #11

The metaphor of a hidden burden being lifted captures the unconscious tension many carry prior to awakening—tension that dissipates through the experience. The release is not only psychological but also somatic, indicating that the peace felt is

not abstract but embodied. In transpersonal frameworks, such cathartic relief is often interpreted as the letting go of egoic identifications or karmic residues, thereby allowing latent states of clarity to emerge (Wilber, 2006; Washburn, 1995).

This embodied peace was echoed by another participant who remarked:

There is this peace because the true nature of ourselves is peace ... It's almost like that got lifted off, and there is no ego to be somebody or be known. I just love kissing my kitty cats all over ... and having friends and scrolling the internet and shopping. Seriously... It's simple, but beautiful, and no one wants really.

Interviewee #12

The disintegration of egoic striving here yields a profound simplicity, characterized by a return to mundane pleasures but through a transformed lens. The idea that “no wants really” remains speaks to a release of desire, a theme central in both Buddhist and Vedantic contemplative traditions, where liberation is marked by the cessation of grasping (Rahula, 1974). What makes this account particularly notable is its juxtaposition of transcendent peace with everyday joys—suggesting that the sacred is no longer distinct from the ordinary but permeates it.

In another account, this affective shift was described as multisensory:

Through the exercises, I felt this accumulation of energy and vibration and expansion inside my physical body. And then emotionally, I felt joy. I felt intense emotions linked to happiness, to peace, to certain independence. But it was also linked to connectivity... and then in a certain moment, I just felt a relief, a lightness, very light and content with whatever it was.

Interviewee #5

The participant here describes the peace not as passive absence but as dynamic expansion—an energized, joyful form of lightness. This interweaving of joy, independence, and connectivity suggests that peace in the kensho context is relational and expansive rather than isolating or neutral. Similar descriptions appear in the mystical literature, where awakening is often felt as both dissolution of separateness and emergence into a radiant, interconnected field of being (Stace, 1960).

Finally, Interviewee #4 portrayed the awakened state as deeply aesthetic and dialogical with the world: “... everything was perfect, every single bird and tree and leaf, everything was this perfect lesson. And fully present with every single thing I interacted with and receiving these really deep insights and teachings from literally everything”. This is not merely a moment of appreciation for nature but an ontological shift in which reality itself becomes a teacher. The experience of “everything being a perfect lesson” implies an animistic or panpsychic awareness, where the boundaries between self and environment dissolve, and insight arises through relational embeddedness. This aligns with scholarship on mystical states as affording a deepened responsiveness to the world’s inherent meaning, wherein the epistemic function is not solely mental but also ecological and embodied (Ferrer, 2002).

3.3.2. Struck by the simplicity of the kensho experience

A recurring theme across the interviews was participants' astonishment at the sheer simplicity of their awakening. Rather than being characterized by elaborate visions or metaphysical revelations, the kensho experience was often described as profoundly quiet, subtle, and free of complexity—something striking not for its grandeur but for its elemental clarity.

Interviewee #11 described this dissolution of complexity as follows:

...it was just happening, and it was without the added mental noise. So, really simplifying my experience, and the extraneous factors of my nature fell away so that it was just me, my being, and all that was happening and nothing else. And it was so simple. And it's something that you don't really notice you're carrying. It's kind of like a fish in water that doesn't realize it's in water until it gets out.

This simile highlights the unnoticed mental load that characterizes ordinary consciousness—only revealed in its absence. The kensho experience here serves as an unveiling, a peeling back of internal clutter to reveal a simple presence that was always already there. The image evokes Buddhist metaphors of 'original mind' or 'beginner's mind', where enlightenment is understood not as acquiring something new, but as recognizing what has always been (Suzuki, 1970).

Another participant observed:

...there was no imagery—it was purely energetic, just vibration, just energy. I didn't need to think of anything, I didn't need to analyze any situation, I didn't need to communicate with anyone. It was just my expansion of me, of who I am energetically.

Interviewee #5

The absence of discursive processing and representational imagery further affirms the minimalist quality of kensho described here. The simplicity is not a lack, but a presence—a pure, unmediated being. This resonates with nondual awareness, which emphasizes a direct encounter with existence that bypasses symbolic cognition.

The radical quietness of the event was also described in temporal terms. Interviewee #11 reflected: "So the switch was from heaviness and confusion to quiet knowing and lightness. And there was nothing, no phenomena that came with that. It was just like a stepping out of something and into something else." The participant emphasizes that the transformation was not marked by dramatic features—no visions, no voices—but by an almost imperceptible shift. The language of "no nothing" reflects both emptiness and clarity, a paradox at the heart of Zen thought where awakening is often described as nothing special yet utterly transformative (Kapleau, 1989).

In a similarly paradoxical account, Interviewee #12 stated: "... it's simple, but beautiful and no wants really". This formulation echoes the previous theme, suggesting that the simplicity of the experience is precisely what makes it beautiful and liberating. The absence of desire and mental elaboration is not impoverishment but abundance—an affective fullness that comes from needing nothing. Rather than

constituting a detachment from life, this simplicity appears to enhance one's capacity for joy and freedom.

Collectively, these reflections emphasize the ontological depth of simplicity in spiritual awakening. Rather than grandiosity or transcendental spectacle, kensho is experienced as a return to being, marked by stillness, clarity, and immediacy. These findings challenge dominant Western frameworks that often conflate mystical experiences with peak or altered states filled with visionary content (Newberg and Waldman, 2009). Instead, they support the growing recognition in contemplative studies that awakening may be quiet, contentless, and yet profoundly transformative.

3.4. Big release

3.4.1. Release from traumas and/or intense emotions

Several participants described the kensho experience as a profound release from the weight of long-held trauma and emotional pain. This release was often framed not as a purely psychological insight, but as a deeply embodied transformation in how trauma was experienced, remembered, and situated in one's life narrative.

Interviewee #11 reflected on this liberation:

The fact that all this trauma was suddenly not an issue anymore was profoundly freeing. And I felt joy and happiness in that full-on knowing, without it being just a concept, but an actual health experience.

Here, the participant emphasizes that the transformation was not intellectual but viscerally 'known'. What had previously been a source of suffering became irrelevant—not repressed, but rendered inert in the light of a new ontological orientation. This is not disassociation but a radical reframing that removes the emotional charge from traumatic memory. Transpersonal theorists have long discussed this type of breakthrough as a potential byproduct of spiritual openings, where deep emotional integration can occur spontaneously, rather than through years of cognitive processing (Grof, 1985; Washburn, 1995).

In a related experience, another participant described how the emotional buildup culminated in a somatic and vocal release:

When I allowed this to build, it involved me actually having to scream some words as if my father was right in front of me. And that was kind of a release of confronting some sort of trapped trauma.

Interviewee #11

This intense moment of re-enactment suggests the convergence of spiritual experience with deep psychodynamic material. The kensho experience here appears to act as a catalyst that loosens repressed emotional content, enabling expression through the body and voice. Rather than bypassing the trauma, the participant confronts it through ritualized engagement, aligning with integrative frameworks that bridge non-ordinary states of consciousness with trauma recovery.

Other participants similarly described the reemergence of previously inaccessible memories. Interviewee #6 explained, "I actually was able to shed light and actually start

reliving those years that were blackened out to me,” indicating that memory recovery was part of the healing arc. The sudden recollection of forgotten or fragmented early experiences—often involving abuse, fear, or neglect—was not always complete or final, but offered a new way to relate to the past. One participant captured this shift vividly:

Yeah, that felt experience was so infinitely more profound and indescribably larger than anything that had happened to me, that the trauma was just a blip on the radar that I could only have compassion for, but it couldn't affect me. So the relief in that was immense.

Interviewee #11

This perspective suggests not merely a reduction in emotional intensity, but a transcendence of narrative identity itself—where past suffering is recontextualized within a much broader field of awareness. This expands on findings in the literature suggesting that spiritual awakenings can facilitate post-traumatic growth, but does so by situating trauma as spiritually insignificant in the face of direct knowing (Taylor, 2012).

However, not all participants described complete resolution. For instance, Interviewee #13 recalled:

I ended up having a memory of myself hidden behind a refrigerator at five years old... I connect with that little child and tell them, it's ok. I do these rituals ... knowing all that, it's not enough though ... it still lingers within me.

Here, the release is partial and ongoing. Despite ritualized healing and inner child work, the imprint of trauma persists, revealing the non-linear and iterative nature of the kensho aftermath. Similarly, Interviewee #7 noted that “sexual assault in younger years ... financial trauma ... growing up with violence” all came up gradually over a five-year span. This highlights that while the kensho moment may act as a catalyst, integration is an extended process, resonating with contemporary integrative models of spiritually transformative experiences.

3.4.2. Questioning by the conceptual mind, in and out of kensho

A distinct pattern observed among several participants involved the oscillation between moments of direct spiritual insight and the return of conceptual doubt or egoic patterning. This process often appeared as a back-and-forth between transcendence and reintegration. Interviewee #1 reflected:

But now looking back from this moment, I feel like it was probably my mind wrapped up in those writings and talking, more than real consciousness. I think that was really just more the thinking mind, who went on a journey to learn about the Bible.

This retrospective insight underscores a key shift in the participant's epistemological stance—from mistaking mental constructs for truth, to distinguishing them from what was later experienced as “real consciousness”. The capacity to discern between conceptual frameworks and direct awareness is a hallmark of Zen training,

where the intellect is seen as both essential and ultimately limited (Suzuki, 1970).

Others described this cognitive dissonance more acutely. Interviewee #3 recalled:

There's an immediate sensation of some sort, almost like fear, like the ego doesn't like that question. The ego immediately starts moving around the mind, looking for an answer, wondering how do I do this right? How do I play the game? And it was there that I was able to step back and watch it.

This passage illustrates the subtlety with which egoic processes reactivate post-kensho. Rather than being eliminated, the ego adapts, resists, or interrogates the new state. The capacity to “step back and watch” reflects a growing metacognitive awareness—what Wilber (2000) refers to as the “witness consciousness”—that enables participants to observe rather than re-identify with the mind's movements.

At times, the mind's questioning also revealed persistent vulnerabilities. Interviewee #4 stated: “That one has been a continual theme through life”, referring to self-doubt that lingered even after the kensho event. The emergence of such themes suggests that while kensho offers profound insight, it does not eradicate long-standing psychological patterns. Instead, it seems to offer a new vantage point from which those patterns can be more clearly observed, interrogated, and potentially transformed.

3.4.3. Very tired and/or frustrated

Though often portrayed as illuminating and serene, the kensho process also involved considerable fatigue and emotional distress. Participants frequently reported exhaustion—both physical and psychological—during and after the event, pointing to the energetic demands of sustained self-inquiry and inner processing. Interviewee #3 recalled the breaking point: “After day five of this, I got so angry because there was no escape from my ego... I didn't really know what this whole experience was or what it was about... I knew I should just sleep.” The desire for sleep amid confusion and agitation speaks to the body's role as a container for the spiritual encounter. The inability to “escape” the ego paradoxically signals a deeper engagement with it, suggesting that exhaustion may serve as a threshold state—where old structures resist dissolution but begin to weaken.

Another participant similarly admitted to emotional overwhelm: “... my initial reaction, which is really shadowy to admit, was that I was super jealous and irritated or frustrated... I was really irritated.” Interviewee #9's frustration, especially directed inward, reflects the confrontation with unconscious emotions that often surface during retreats. Rather than being anomalies, these feelings appear intrinsic to the process.

Interviewee #11 added: “I think I was quite tired that day and sleepy ... just kind of got me a little worn out,” indicating that fatigue was not always dramatic, but quietly cumulative. Others, like Interviewee #1, described a more existential weariness: “I experienced burnout... I'm not here anymore. What happened to me?” In this account, exhaustion becomes a form of identity dissolution, potentially paving the way for rebirth—but only after a passage through disorientation. Interviewee #7 provided a more physiological account: “I did not feel like I was very present ... just patching out ... overriding the needs of my body and just pushing and pushing through.” This indicates that somatic boundaries were often stretched beyond sustainable limits. These accounts

challenge idealized notions of spiritual awakening, instead revealing the process as one that demands both resilience and surrender.

3.4.4. Addressing triggers/karma/samskara as they come up

Karma and samskaras are used here in a psychological sense to denote accumulated experiential imprints and conditioned patterns that shape perception and behaviour. Samskaras refer specifically to latent cognitive-emotional residues, while karma reflects their unfolding expression over time. In this study, these constructs are grouped with “triggers” to capture the real-time activation of latent conditioned patterns as they emerge in participants’ lived experience. Several participants articulated that the kensho experience involved confronting deep psychological and karmic patterns, often emerging spontaneously or through relational triggers. These impressions—commonly described in yogic philosophy as samskaras—were not intellectual memories but embodied imprints activated through specific contexts. Interviewee #12 explained: “Dark night of the soul to me is not really the samskara because that buildup was more like samskara of no self-worth and not being good enough in my mind, and maybe abandonment issues.” This differentiation between existential darkness and unresolved psychological conditioning speaks to the complexity of spiritual integration. Samskaras, in this context, are not abstract metaphysical residues but manifest as tangible emotional narratives.

A particularly insightful account came from the same participant: “There was a lot of suffering that would come to the surface, maybe because [my partner] was around and he’s this perfect platform for my samskaras to come up.” Here, relational dynamics act as mirrors—externalizing what remains unresolved. In Buddhist and yogic traditions, this is often described as karmic unfolding catalyzed by proximity to equanimity (Feuerstein, 1998). Others described a shift in how they related to these internal patterns. Interviewee #13 shared: “I just laugh at whatever I don’t understand, like I’m burning off some karma right now... I surrender, man.” The tone of surrender, coupled with levity, suggests that the relationship to suffering itself had changed. Karma is no longer an oppressive force, but a process to be witnessed, even humorously.

Interviewee #11 offered a similar insight: “I think what’s changed is that I can face it more head-on. When suffering does arise, I’m not as afraid to face it ... so that it can just move through.” This approach echoes therapeutic models of emotional regulation that emphasize non-resistance as a path to integration (Hayes et al., 2006), but with a spiritual orientation. Finally, Interviewee #6 reflected: “It was essentially burning karma at the time as healing ... it brought me back through the experiences of what it was healing at the same time.” This dual motion—revisiting while releasing—reinforces that karmic resolution in kensho is not avoidance but accelerated confrontation, framed within a compassionate awareness.

3.5. Heightened senses

3.5.1. Trusting in the unknown

A defining feature of the kensho experience, for many participants, was an emergent sense of trust in an unseen intelligence—what several referred to as

surrendering to ‘the unknown’. This trust was not based on empirical evidence or rational deduction but was rooted in a deeply intuitive orientation toward the sacred or ineffable. Interviewee #1 recalled a pivotal moment of surrender during the retreat: “But then I said, I’m just gonna trust”. Similarly, Interviewee #2 described an epistemological shift that defied cognitive explanation: “So I just have to accept that I have another way of knowing and another knowledge that’s not through the mind.” This form of knowing, experienced as non-conceptual and embodied, aligns with the Zen Buddhist emphasis on *prajna*—direct insight that transcends dualistic thinking (Suzuki, 1970). The decision to “just trust” reflects a movement away from egoic control toward receptivity, a quality often regarded as essential for spiritual awakening (Ferrer, 2002; Caplan, 2009).

The relational dimension of this trust was also evident in mystical encounters with non-human intelligences. Interviewee #2 described an energetic communion with the spirit of *iboga* despite not ingesting it: “I felt the spirit of *Iboga* come into me... I could have had a full experience because I could feel that whole energy”. The absence of a pharmacological trigger here emphasizes that the participant’s trust in the unknown allowed for a deeply spiritual and somatic encounter. Trust, in this context, was a precondition for accessing non-ordinary forms of perception—described as a porous consciousness capable of interfacing with subtle energetic fields.

This openness was contrasted by moments where doubt re-entered. Interviewee #6 recalled a telepathic connection with a wild cougar, disrupted by mental interference: “That was the ego that said that because without it, I would’ve been able to interact with the cougar longer”. The disruption of the mystical moment illustrates the fragility of trust when conceptual mind reasserts itself, echoing literature on the oscillation between awakened and egoic states. Ultimately, the surrender to the unknown appeared to restore a deeper sense of belonging. As Interviewee #6 shared, “It was like, oh, I’m actually home. This is a real home where I finally belong”. This experience of spiritual homecoming points to the existential resolution that can emerge when individuals relinquish the illusion of control. In many mystical traditions, surrender is not weakness but alignment with divine will or cosmic intelligence (Underhill, 2002). The present findings extend this view by showing how trust operates not only as an emotional state but as an ontological reconfiguration of one’s place in the universe.

3.5.2. Heightened sense of awareness, the five senses, and beyond

Kensho experiences were often marked by a radical intensification of perceptual awareness. For many participants, ordinary sensory information took on an extraordinary vividness, while others described perceptions that extended beyond the traditional five senses into subtle, intersubjective, or energetic domains. Interviewee #12 described this transformation in striking terms:

It was almost like everything came to a halt, like a stop. And it’s almost like I saw the room for the first time. It was new. I could see the dust. The sun was shining through the dust in the air. Just very, very clear and very new... the quality of the world is so different when you’re not filtering and not knowing the piano is a piano or the table is a table.

This observation reflects what Buddhist psychology refers to as bare attention—a mode of awareness unmediated by conceptual labeling (Gunaratana, 2011). The ordinary becomes miraculous, not because the external world changes, but because the habitual interpretive filters have momentarily dissolved.

Several participants reported intersubjective phenomena. Interviewee #9 noted: “It was like the world stopped. It was like we saw each other, we just knew who we were ... and senses that came online that I never thought were possible”. This suggests the activation of what Wilber (2000) terms ‘subtle’ capacities—experiential faculties beyond gross sensory input. In spiritual emergence literature, such expanded perception is often described as a hallmark of awakening, yet remains understudied in empirical research (Grof and Grof, 1990).

For Interviewee #11, auditory perception became a spiritual tether: “And that sound [Canadian Geese] was somehow involved in bringing me into this laughter... I would hear the geese again, and I would remember and completely just be smiling and laughing again”. This illustrates the role of environmental stimuli as catalysts for maintaining or re-entering awakened states. Similarly, Interviewee #4 described an animistic intimacy with the natural world: “Just walking around, everything was perfect, every single bird and tree and leaf, everything was this perfect lesson”. This reflects a deepened aesthetic and epistemological receptivity, echoing findings that mystical states often involve heightened ecological awareness. These accounts suggest that sensory transformation in kensho is not merely a side effect but a key dimension of the awakening process. The world is perceived not as an object but as a teacher—alive, sentient, and communicative.

3.5.3. Listening to inner guidance

The emergence of an inner guidance system was another prominent feature of participants’ accounts. This guidance was not described as self-generated thought but as a deeper current of direction, intuition, or synchronicity emerging from within. Interviewee #10 recalled, “There was definitely a searching, there was a feeling that there’s something more, a feeling of an inner guidance system... I listened to that inner direction”. The recognition of an internal compass reflects a shift from external authority to self-trust, often described in transpersonal frameworks as alignment with the higher self or soul (Daniels, 2005).

For some, this inner prompting began in dreams or patterns of synchronicity. Interviewee #3 shared: “There was an inner process going on from inside that was knocking on the door... And I saw it as synchronicity”. Here, the unconscious becomes a collaborator in the awakening process, surfacing material through indirect symbolic channels. This echoes Jungian perspectives on spiritual development as a dialogue between conscious and unconscious forces (Jung, 1969).

Other participants described direct knowing or intuition. Interviewee #6 said, “It was more running on intuition and listening to what I understood to be correct”. This intuitive action bypasses analytical reasoning, representing a reorientation toward somatic and energetic cues. The reliance on intuition, particularly in spiritually transformative contexts, has been explored in studies of noetic consciousness, where participants report a strong sense of inner certainty even in the absence of external

validation (Wahbeh et al., 2018).

For some, the guidance was auditory and startling. Interviewee #8 recalled: “I heard a voice yell, ‘stop’. And it was a big clap. And I didn’t know where the voice came from, but I knew to listen to it...” This experience, while potentially interpreted as hallucinatory in clinical paradigms, was described here as protective and clarifying. The boundary between inner and outer collapses, allowing guidance to emerge in visceral, often surprising forms. These findings suggest that inner guidance during kensho is not monolithic—it can arise through sensation, symbol, synchronicity, or sound. What unites these modes is their non-rational authority and their orientation toward deeper coherence.

3.5.4. Physical sensations

While kensho is often described in cognitive or emotional terms, many participants reported intense physical sensations accompanying their awakening. These bodily experiences were not incidental but appeared integral to the transformational process, often signaling moments of energetic or emotional release. Interviewee #7 provided one of the most striking examples:

And in that experience... I birthed my own self. I went through labour, and I birthed myself. And in the moment that I crowned, I was crowning out of my own self. And I was feeling the labour contractions. I was feeling all of the physical pain and sensations of birthing.

This metaphorical rebirth, described in vividly embodied language, resonates with archetypal models of spiritual renewal. Grof’s (1985) perinatal matrices describe how spiritual breakthroughs often involve symbolic or literal experiences of birth, suggesting that deep psychospiritual transformation can manifest somatically. Interviewee #5 similarly reported:

Through the exercises, I felt this accumulation of energy and vibration and expansion inside my physical body. And then emotionally, I felt joy. I felt intense emotions linked to happiness, to peace, to certain independence.

This interweaving of energy, emotion, and physicality highlights the integral role of the body in transpersonal states. Rather than being transcended, the body becomes the site of revelation. Others noted spontaneous physical movements. Interviewee #11 described:

And then also there were spontaneous movements through my shoulders and neck ... those are areas where I was carrying so much tension and just an intuitive movement that I didn’t plan was freeing all that physical tension.

Such somatic release reflects patterns found in somatic trauma therapies, where involuntary movement is often a sign of nervous system recalibration (van der Kolk, 2014). Here, however, the participant locates the release not within a therapeutic frame but as part of a mystical encounter.

Interviewee #9 reported intense bodily catharsis:

And then, when I had the realization. I was convulsing. My legs were really, really shaking. And saliva was coming out. And I was crying, there were tears. I wasn't upset or anything. And then I was just very much in that energetic space of shaking and having the realization that I did.

These examples indicate that kensho may involve a full-spectrum somatic response that both reflects and enables psychological and spiritual transformation. The physical body, in these accounts, is not left behind but transformed into a vessel for awakening.

Given the centrality of trusting in the unknown and feelings of inner peace across participant narratives, these two variables were selected as outcome conditions in the subsequent QCA. Both emerged repeatedly as core dimensions of the kensho experience and were associated with distinct yet overlapping configurations of cognitive, emotional, and somatic phenomena. Unlike other themes, these outcomes reflect overarching transformations in being and knowing, offering optimal leverage for exploring causal patterns. Their selection is further justified by their grounding in direct phenomenological descriptions and their relevance to existing but underdeveloped literature on spiritual surrender and equanimity.

3.6. Study 2: Analytical method

Building from the qualitative data gathered from 13 participants who experienced kensho, individual case narratives were developed to preserve the richness of each account. These case histories served as the foundation for a fuzzy-set QCA (fs/QCA), a methodological approach that integrates the contextual depth of qualitative inquiry with the configurational logic of set-theoretic methods (Crilly, 2011; Overall, 2016; Overall and Wise, 2016). As a hybrid methodology, QCA offers a middle ground between the holistic character of qualitative research and the pattern-seeking orientation of quantitative models, allowing for moderate generalizability while preserving complexity.

QCA relies on Boolean algebra to examine causal complexity, assuming that outcomes—such as trusting the unknown—result from specific combinations of antecedent conditions (Crilly, 2011). In this framework, input variables function analogously to independent variables in statistical models, while output variables represent the dependent outcome (Overall and Wise, 2016). This configurational approach allows for the identification of multiple, equally valid pathways that may lead to a shared experiential outcome.

The fs/QCA process unfolded across four stages. In the initial phase, calibration was performed manually using binary measures of set membership: full membership (1) or full non-membership (0) (Crilly et al., 2012). Each case and condition was assigned a value based on this dichotomy. However, in contrast to crisp-set QCA, which is restricted to binary distinctions, this study employed a fuzzy-set approach, enabling degrees of membership along a continuous scale. Calibration entailed a detailed return to the interview data for each participant to score each input variable based on qualitative intensity and alignment. These values were then translated into scores ranging from 0 to 1, akin to a normalized 10-point Likert-type scale, with 1

indicating full membership and 0 indicating complete non-membership (Crilly et al., 2012; Overall, 2016).

In the second stage, the fs/QCA software was used to construct a truth table via the Quine-McCluskey algorithm, identifying all empirically observed configurations of input variables that could produce the designated outcomes (Overall and Wise, 2016; Schneider and Wagemann, 2010). In the case of this research, because there are nine input variables, there are 2^9 logically possible configurations. Importantly, for this research, all combinations that are not associated with the 13 participants were excluded. Only the configurations with at least one observation were retained (Crilly, 2011). In other words, all logical remainders, which are those where there is no case present, were removed (Crilly et al., 2012; Overall and Wise, 2016). This approach is consistent with the extant QCA literature (e.g., Crilly et al., 2012; Overall and Wise, 2016).

Boolean minimization was applied in step three to distill these configurations into their most parsimonious forms. This algebraic simplification enabled identification of necessary and sufficient causal conditions—combinations of variables that reliably corresponded to the outcomes of interest (Fiss, 2007). The resulting formulae preserved causal complexity while reducing redundancy.

The final step involved evaluating the model's fit using two key metrics: consistency and coverage. Consistency assesses the degree to which cases sharing a configuration also exhibit the outcome, effectively functioning as a measure of internal validity. Scores above 0.8 are generally accepted as indicators of robust models, with scores approaching 0.95 reflecting high reliability (Crilly, 2011; Ragin, 2007; Overall, 2016; Overall and Wise, 2016). As Greckhamer (2011, p. 94) explains, "consistency measures the degree to which cases sharing a given condition agree in displaying an outcome." Coverage evaluates the proportion of cases explained by a given solution, akin to effect size in quantitative paradigms (Crilly et al., 2012). 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.

3.7. Study 2: Data analysis

To capture the range of causal pathways leading to feelings of inner peace and trusting in the unknown (Crilly, 2011), two QCA investigations were conducted. The first analysis examined feelings of inner peace. The second analysis focused on trusting the unknown. Both analyses used truth table techniques in the fs/QCA software to systematically assess causal relationships.

The input variables under investigation—feeling of peace, beauty, love, and oneness with everything, struck by simplicity of kensho experience, release from traumas and/or intense emotions, questioning by mind, in and out of kensho, very

tired and/or frustrated, addressing triggers/karma/samskara as they come up, trusting in the unknown, heightened sense of awareness, the five senses, and beyond, listening to inner guidance, and; physical sensations—were classified as core causal conditions, reflecting their essential role in: (a) feelings of inner peace and (b) trusting in the unknown (Fiss, 2011). Consistent with established QCA protocols (Crilly, 2011), a consistency threshold of 0.8 was adopted to ensure analytical rigour (Fiss, 2011). Following best practices in set-theoretic methods, the intermediate solution—striking a balance between analytic complexity and interpretive parsimony—was selected for presentation (Crilly et al., 2012; Overall, 2016). A minimum consistency threshold of 0.8 was applied in accordance with conventional standards (Crilly, 2011; Fiss, 2011) (Table 3).

Table 3. Calibration table for qualitative comparative analysis.

Participant	Peace/Love/Oneness	Simplicity	Emotional release	Ego returns	Tired frustrated	Karma triggers	Trust in divine	Sensory awareness	Inner guidance	Physical sensations
1	1	0.9	0.8	0.7	0.6	0.5	0.8	0.7	0.6	0.7
2	1	0.6	0.5	0.7	0.4	0.6	0.8	0.8	0.7	0.6
3	1	0.8	0.9	0.6	0.5	0.6	0.9	0.9	0.8	0.9
4	0.9	0.7	0.8	0.6	0.5	0.6	0.9	0.8	0.7	0.8
5	0.8	0.6	0.7	0.8	0.7	0.6	0.7	0.8	0.7	0.9
6	0.9	0.8	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.8	0.7	0.6	0.7
7	0.9	0.9	0.8	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.9	0.9	0.8	0.9
8	0.9	0.7	0.9	0.8	0.7	0.7	0.9	0.8	0.7	0.8
9	1	0.9	0.9	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.9	0.8	0.7	0.9
10	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.8	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.7	0.6	0.8
11	0.8	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.5	0.6	0.8	0.8	0.7	0.7
12	0.8	0.7	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.9	0.8	0.8	0.8
13	1	0.8	0.9	0.7	0.6	0.8	0.9	0.9	0.8	0.9

4. Results

According to the results in Table 4, the core causal conditions associated with feelings of inner peace include: addressing triggers/karma/samskara as they come up, a heightened sense of awareness, the five senses, and beyond, and listening to inner guidance. The consistency score for this model is 0.88, with a raw coverage of 0.297 and a unique coverage of 0.297. Additionally, the overall solution consistency is 0.925, while the overall solution coverage is 1—indicating a reliable model. This configuration reveals that participants who experienced moderate karmic activation (karma/triggers = 0.6), heightened sensory awareness (sensory awareness = 0.8), and strong inner guidance (inner guidance = 0.7) were most likely to report a state of profound peace, love, and oneness. These findings suggest that a balance between working through internal imprints (karma), remaining somatically attuned, and following internal intuitive processes creates fertile ground for transcendent affective experiences. The combination reflects a grounded yet expanded state—participants are actively processing internal residues while staying open to embodied insight, enabling a unified consciousness experience. Of the 13 participants, four displayed this configuration.

Table 4. Configuration of causal conditions leading to feeling peace, beauty, love, oneness with everything.

Configurations for peace/love/oneness	
Causal conditions	Configuration 1
Addressing triggers/karma/samskara as they come up	●
Heightened sense of awareness, the 5 senses, and beyond	●
Listening to inner guidance	●
Consistency	0.875
Raw coverage	0.297
Unique coverage	0.297
Overall solution consistency	0.925
Overall solution coverage	1

Note: Key (●): core causal condition (present); core causal condition (absent). This format of presenting the results of the fuzzy-set analysis is based on Ragin and Sonnett (2007).

From the findings in **Table 5**, the core causal conditions associated with trusting in the unknown include: heightened sense of awareness, the five senses, and beyond, listening to inner guidance, and physical sensations. The consistency score for this model is 0.90, the raw coverage is 0.25, and the unique coverage is 0.25. From **Table 5**, the overall solution consistency is 0.843, and the overall solution coverage is 0.944, which suggests that the model is reliable. This configuration identifies that deep trust in the divine emerged among participants with peak sensory awareness (0.9), strong inner guidance (0.8), and heightened physical sensations (0.9). The presence of these three core conditions points to a direct, embodied mystical experience in which the body itself becomes a medium of divine communication. Trust appears not as a cognitive belief but as a felt certainty rooted in lived sensation and internal alignment. This suggests that somatic intensity, coupled with internal clarity, fosters surrender and alignment with a higher intelligence or spiritual force. Of the 13 participants, three displayed this configuration.

Table 5. Configuration of causal conditions leading to trusting in the unknown.

Configurations for trusting in the unknown	
Causal conditions	Configuration 1
Heightened sense of awareness, the 5 senses, and beyond	●
Listening to inner guidance	●
Physical sensations	●
Consistency	0.9
Raw coverage	0.25
Unique coverage	0.25
Overall solution consistency	0.843
Overall solution coverage	0.944

Note: Key (●): core causal condition (present); core causal condition (absent). This format of presenting the results of the fuzzy-set analysis is based on Ragin and Sonnett (2007).

The two configurations partially overlap—sensory awareness and inner guidance are shared causal conditions, but peace/love/oneness includes karmic engagement, while trust in the divine emphasizes physical intensity. This interaction suggests two adjacent yet distinct pathways to spiritual transformation: one grounded in inner emotional processing (karma) and the other in embodied surrender (physical sensations). Participants who exhibited both may have accessed both emotional

resolution and spiritual trust through an embodied, intuitive channel. The intersection underscores the importance of internal awareness (guidance and sensory presence) as a shared foundation for higher states of consciousness.

5. General discussion

This study generated a uniquely detailed phenomenology of the kensho experience by analyzing first-person accounts from 13 participants and identifying the underlying configurations associated with inner peace and trust in the unknown. Rather than confirming established psychological or spiritual models, the findings uncovered subtle, often overlooked dynamics—including the transformative role of simplicity, the epistemic significance of sensory awareness, and the catalytic function of karmic activation. The use of grounded theory and QCA in tandem enabled a multi-layered analysis that linked narrative meaning-making to causal configurations. The main contributions to knowledge described in the ensuing paragraphs reflect the most conceptually significant insights to emerge from this process, each addressing an unresolved or underdeveloped area in the academic literature on kensho spiritual awakening.

5.1. Embodied peace as ontological reorientation

A central contribution of this study is the articulation of peace not as a passive emotional state or absence of distress, but as an ontological reorientation—an embodied, expansive, and relational experience of being. Across participant narratives, inner peace was not simply affective relief but a dissolution of ego-bound identity and the emergence of non-conceptual knowing. This contrasts with much of the psychological literature on peace, which tends to frame it within affect regulation, cognitive reframing, or interpersonal reconciliation (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2005). While some contemplative and transpersonal frameworks address peace in more expansive terms (Wilber, 2006; Washburn, 1995), few studies have provided first-person phenomenological accounts that reframe peace as a post-egoic ontological condition.

The findings extend classical accounts of mystical experience—such as James’s (2004) concept of ‘noetic’ insight or Stace’s (1960) emphasis on unity—by showing that peace emerges not merely as a byproduct of insight but as a direct expression of a new mode of being. The fact that participants associated this peace with the dissolution of striving, conceptual thought, and desire suggests alignment with nondual frameworks (Ferrer, 2002) that view spiritual insight as the collapse of dualistic perception. Moreover, this research challenges traditions that overly psychologize peace (e.g., positive psychology), revealing that in spiritual awakenings such as kensho, peace may arise not through regulation or reframing but through the cessation of the self-referential mind.

The study’s QCA findings further corroborate this, identifying a configuration in which karmic processing, heightened sensory awareness, and inner guidance collectively fostered experiences of peace, love, and oneness. This positions peace as both an outcome of deep inner processing and a portal to relational, ecological awareness—where participants described “receiving teachings from everything”. Such

findings reorient scholarly discussions away from intrapsychic definitions and toward peace as a systemic, embodied, and epistemically transformative state. By framing peace as a metaphysical attunement rather than a psychological variable, this study offers a novel contribution to transpersonal theory, contemplative studies, and the emerging field of spiritual neuroscience.

5.2. Simplicity as a core property of nondual awakening

This research uncovers the profound role of simplicity as a defining property of kensho, challenging the dominant emphasis on spectacular or visionary content in Western portrayals of spiritual awakening. Contrary to expectations of visual grandeur or auditory revelation often found in psychedelic and mystical experience literature (Newberg and Waldman, 2009), participants consistently described their awakening as ‘nothing special’—characterized by an absence of mental content, a collapse of inner noise, and a return to a silent, immediate mode of being. This affirms and extends insights from Zen Buddhist scholarship where kensho and satori are described not as peak experiences but as radical simplifications of mind and identity (Suzuki, 1970; Kapleau, 1989). However, few empirical studies have rigorously documented this phenomenology across multiple participants using grounded theory methods. Most western frameworks, particularly those influenced by neurotheological models or entheogenic studies, have emphasized the intensity, vividness, or peak nature of altered states (Lebedev et al., 2015), often overlooking the transformative power of subtlety and stillness.

The participants’ descriptions of shedding mental ‘water they didn’t know they were swimming in’ offer a fresh lens on awakening—as a process of subtraction, not addition. This is not merely an aesthetic insight but a theoretical intervention, suggesting that spiritual transformation may be characterized by the removal of interpretive structures rather than their augmentation. This contributes to an underdeveloped line of inquiry in consciousness studies that explores minimal phenomenal selfhood and contentless awareness (Metzinger, 2018).

By identifying simplicity as a causal and experiential core of kensho, this research invites scholars to reconsider the metrics by which spiritual depth is assessed. It also contributes to the growing contemplative science literature that critiques the privileging of peak over baseline experiences. In doing so, this study offers a corrective to the spectacle-driven models of mystical experience and positions simplicity—radical, ordinary, and unadorned—as a legitimate and profound manifestation of spiritual realization.

5.3. Somatic intensity as a gateway to trust and transformation

This study introduces a critical advancement in understanding the role of physical sensation in spiritual awakening, highlighting the body as both medium and messenger in the kensho experience. While embodiment has been increasingly recognized in transpersonal psychology and trauma literature (van der Kolk, 2014), the present findings go further by demonstrating that somatic intensity—convulsions, labour-like birthing, spontaneous movements—can serve as the primary vehicle through which

trust in the unknown arises. The QCA results revealed that physical sensation, in tandem with heightened awareness and inner guidance, formed a reliable configuration associated with spiritual trust, suggesting that bodily states are not incidental but integral to surrender.

These findings challenge the dominance of cognitive or visionary frameworks in the study of spiritual experience, which often treat the body as secondary or symbolic. The testimonies here indicate that profound existential trust was not formed through abstract belief but through the body's 'felt certainty', as participants described energetic alignment, deep knowing, and unshakable spiritual homecoming rooted in sensation. This is consistent with emerging models of embodied cognition and 'embodied spirituality' (Ferrer, 2002), but this study is among the first to empirically demonstrate this linkage using QCA logic.

The integration of somatic experience as a determinant of trust also bridges contemplative studies and trauma healing paradigms. For example, spontaneous physical movements and energetic releases resembled somatic processing mechanisms noted in trauma therapies, yet participants did not experience them as therapeutic regressions but as breakthroughs into a new ontological baseline. Thus, the study offers a novel synthesis—positioning somatic intensity not only as a mechanism of healing but as a precursor to mystical surrender. In foregrounding the body as a site of ontological disclosure, this research not only fills a key empirical gap but also advances theoretical models of transpersonal development by challenging Cartesian assumptions that separate knowing from feeling, and consciousness from flesh.

5.4. Karma and samskara processing as active mechanisms in kensho

This research contributes to knowledge by empirically demonstrating how karmic and samskaric processes operate as active mechanisms within kensho awakenings. Participants described triggering events, emotional confrontations, and long-suppressed memories surfacing spontaneously—experiences that were interpreted not as pathological disruptions but as vital components of awakening. These findings support and extend eastern philosophical models of samskara (Feuerstein, 1998) and karma as latent psychological imprints, while also enriching the limited empirical literature on their activation during altered states of consciousness.

While yogic and Buddhist traditions have long posited the purification of samskaras as necessary for spiritual progress (Rahula, 1974), empirical evidence has been scarce. This study addresses this gap by demonstrating how participants not only encountered karmic material but engaged it through surrender, ritual, and intuitive knowing—sometimes laughing at it, other times facing it 'head-on'. Importantly, these were not dissociated or repressed contents but emotionally charged patterns reactivated within safe, high-intensity settings, supporting theories that certain spiritual contexts catalyze both transpersonal insight and deep psychodynamic processing (Grof, 1985; Taylor, 2012).

The labour of awakening—burning karma, engaging triggers, surrendering into discomfort—is shown to be a generative force rather than an obstacle. This challenges overly sanitized or romanticized views of spiritual transformation and contributes to a

more dialectical model that integrates suffering and realization. The QCA findings further underscore this mechanism: karmic engagement (karma/triggers = 0.6) was a core condition associated with inner peace. Rather than being resolved through cognitive insight, these karmic processes were experienced as being metabolized through intuitive and bodily means. By linking samskara activation with stable outcomes like peace, the study offers a unique contribution to transpersonal psychology, contemplative science, and post-materialist models of consciousness—proposing that karmic processing is not an antecedent to awakening but a co-constitutive feature of it.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Implications for contemplative practice, cognition, and therapeutic frameworks

The findings carry important implications for contemplative practice, particularly the Charles Berner self-inquiry dyad protocol. The results suggest that its efficacy lies not only in generating insight, but in engaging cognitive, somatic, and relational processes simultaneously. The identified configurations—especially those involving sensory awareness, inner guidance, and karmic activation—indicate that the dyadic structure may facilitate real-time integration across these domains, accelerating shifts in awareness that might otherwise require prolonged solitary practice. This positions the method as a structured interpersonal system capable of supporting embodied transformation.

More broadly, the findings contribute to ongoing debates in cognitive science by suggesting that transformative shifts in awareness are not reducible to changes in belief or discursive thought. Instead, they support an expanded view of cognition as involving embodied, affective, and perceptual reorganization. The observed configurations indicate that changes in awareness emerge through the interaction of somatic intensity, attentional processes, and intuitive orientation, extending embodied and enactive models of cognition into the domain of spiritual awakening.

These insights also have implications for therapeutic practice. The findings suggest that profound psychological shifts may be facilitated not only through cognitive restructuring, but through processes that engage the body, perception, and relational context. In particular, the role of karmic activation and somatic intensity highlights the value of integrating experiential and embodied approaches when supporting individuals undergoing spiritually transformative experiences.

Finally, the results contribute to differentiating kensho from related phenomena. Unlike psychedelic or visionary states, which often involve perceptual augmentation or symbolic content, kensho appears to involve a reduction of cognitive filtering, resulting in a simplified and immediate mode of awareness. This distinction suggests that kensho may be better understood as a subtractive process, marked by the dissolution of interpretive structures rather than the expansion of experience.

6.2. Limitations & future directions

While this study offers novel insights into the phenomenology and causal architecture of kensho spiritual awakenings, several methodological limitations warrant consideration. First, the inherently ineffable and transconceptual nature of kensho posed interpretive challenges when translating lived experience into language. Although grounded theory allowed for nuanced analysis of participants' phenomenological accounts, many descriptions pointed to experiences beyond the grasp of verbal articulation. This limitation reflects broader constraints in the empirical study of nondual states, where linguistic representation may distort or underrepresent the immediacy and paradox of awakening (Ferrer, 2002). Future research could complement language-based methods with arts-based, embodied, or imaginal methodologies—such as drawing, movement, or contemplative journaling—to access pre-reflective dimensions of experience and enhance epistemic inclusivity.

Second, while the integration of grounded theory and fs/QCA allowed for the identification of causal patterns underlying peace and trust, the calibration process involved researcher-led interpretive judgments. These judgments, though theoretically anchored and transparently applied, introduce subjectivity that could affect reproducibility. Future studies should consider incorporating interrater calibration procedures, Delphi panels, or participant-guided scoring methods to enhance analytic reliability and participatory validity within fs/QCA frameworks.

Third, the study sample, while yielding rich insight, was composed exclusively of individuals who had undergone a kensho awakening in a structured retreat environment. As such, findings may reflect a context-dependent structure of experience, influenced by interpersonal dynamics, facilitator presence, and contemplative practices. To address this, future research should examine kensho-like phenomena in secular, clinical, or spontaneous contexts, enabling comparative insight into how setting, support structures, and intention shape the phenomenology and integration of awakening.

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Institutional review board statement: This study was conducted under the auspices of a privately funded research centre that operates independently of Canada's federal research agencies. In accordance with Canadian research policy, studies involving human participants that are privately funded and unaffiliated with institutions governed by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), or the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) are exempt from mandatory review by a Research Ethics Board (REB)—the Canadian equivalent of an Institutional Review Board (IRB). As such, REB oversight is required only when research is conducted under the jurisdiction of publicly funded institutions or supported by federal research funds (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2022; Law Commission of Canada, 2000). In keeping with national ethical standards, this research adhered fully to the principles and guidelines outlined in the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2) and the Declaration of Helsinki.

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 A. 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?