

Satori

1. Highest mental state of Zen Buddhism.
2. A state of grace achieved via a sudden illumination.
3. (Japanese: satori; Chinese: wǎn¹ - from the verb, Satoru) is a Zen Buddhist term for enlightenment. The word literally means "to understand". It is sometimes loosely used interchangeably with Kensho, but Kensho refers to the first perception of the Buddha-Nature or True-Nature. The kensho experience may not hold as further training is still necessary by the Monk or Lay. Satori on the other hand refers to the lasting experience. Think of when a baby first walks, after much effort, it stands upright, find its balance and walks a few steps, then falls (Kensho). After continued effort the child will one day find that it is able to walk all the time (Satori).

Once the True-Nature has been seen, it is customary to use Satori when referring to the enlightenment of the Buddha and the Patriarchs, as their enlightenment was permanent.

The Zen Buddhist experience commonly recognizes enlightenment as a transitory thing in life, almost synonymous with the English term epiphany, and Satori is the realization of a state of epiphanic enlightenment. Because all things are transitory according to Zen philosophy, however, the transitory nature of Satori is not regarded as limiting in the way that a transitory epiphany would be in Western understandings of enlightenment.

The transitory nature of Satori, as opposed to the more enduring Nirvana that is sought in the Buddhist traditions of India, owes much to Taoist influences on ChĀn Buddhism in China, from which Zen Buddhism of Japan evolved. Taoism is a mystical philosophy that emphasizes the purity of the moment, whereas the Hindu roots of Indian Buddhism lend a longer view toward escaping the Karmic prison of perpetual reincarnation in the material world. From Taoism's attention to the importance of the moment and Mahayana Buddhism's almost nihilistic denial of the validity of individual existence, Zen Buddhism with its concept of the transitory state of Satori was born.