

Bernie Glassman: My vision of the Zen Peacemaker Order

I'd like to talk about my vision of the Zen Peacemaker Order. I'll start off at the beginning. And the beginning took place about twenty-one years ago. Twenty-one years ago (1994) I had finished different phases of my Zen training.

My first twenty years of Zen training was here (Zen Center of Los Angeles) in a Japanese-style Zen center with a Japanese teacher (Maezumi Roshi.) But after about twenty years, I had an experience that made me want to work in a bigger venue than just in a Zen center. And the venue had something to do with Indra's net. Most of you are familiar with that. It's a metaphor used in Buddhism for all of life. And it closely relates to the modern physics idea of starting with the Big Bang, and energy flowing through the universe. So Indra's net is this net that extends throughout all space and time, and has at each node a pearl. Constantly there are new pearls being generated. Every instant there's a new pearl. So as I'm talking, I'm generating a new pearl. And each pearl contains every other pearl. And every pearl contains this pearl that I'm generating. So it's all of life.

And my feeling was that I had been practicing . . . For me, enlightenment means to experience the oneness of life. And that keeps getting deeper, that experience. And for me, what it means is at any moment I could look at what portion of the net am I connected with? I'm connected to a fairly large portion. And what portions aren't I connected to, and why? And I came to think that one of the big reasons we're not connected with certain portions of the net is we're afraid. We're afraid to get connected, to enter those fears. And there are other reasons that may relate to DNA, or all kinds of things.

So I wanted to extend. My feeling was in those first twenty years, I was connecting only to people who came to our Zendo. So it was a portion of the net. There was much more out there. And the experience I had led me to say I want to connect to all of those spheres. And for the next twenty years I worked at trying to do that. To more spheres in the world of business, and social action, their worlds. And then into worlds that I was afraid of—going to live in the streets, doing these Bearing Witness retreats in places that had a façade, a very negative power. But still they're part of the net, so I went there.

And then on my fifty-fifth birthday, which was twenty-one years ago, I wanted to figure out what am I gonna do next? And already by then, I was trying to live my life according to three tenets—not knowing (not having any plans what I'm gonna do), bearing witness (spending time trying to *grok* into the situation), and then seeing what actions would come out of that. So I decided to do a retreat, which I did. I decided to do it on the steps of the Capitol, in Washington, D.C., and I invited people. There were about twenty of us. And I gave as a theme for that retreat, what actions are we gonna take in our lives that will help the aspects of society that we're not dealing with, and society's not dealing with? That was the question I put out.

And again the instructions for how to work with that, you could look at as a koan, but the instructions how to work it—start off not knowing. Don't come up with any ideas at the beginning of what that's going to mean. And then bear witness to that question, which is what we do in koan study. We're given a koan—we're supposed to come to it without any ideas first, and bear witness to that koan. And see what comes up.

What came up for me, after that week . . . My birthday is in January, and I love to say that that particular January, twenty-one years ago, was the coldest January in the history of Washington, DC. So we were sitting in snow. We were all covered in snow. And what came up for me after that week was the idea of a container for people who are interested in meditation, and social action. And an international container, where people could relate to each other, share with each other. And that's what I started to work on.

And I went home, and I shared that with my wife, Jishu. And she said, "Let's start an Order." So we started the Zen Peacemaker Order at that point. And at that point, the Zen Peacemaker Order was for people who were interested in mediation and social action. And we asked everybody who joined as staff, and some who were joining as members to create a mala system to support themselves. What we did is we said find somebody who will help support you in this practice. And that's one of the beads on your mala. Go out, and reach enough people to get to where you can support yourself. We even hired an executive director—his whole salary was supported that way. So we were basically begging, which is another practice I feel very strongly about. And that eliminated financial difficulties, because we didn't have to pay. And if we couldn't raise the money to do what we wanted to do, we did with what we raised.

So that was the beginning. It went on for a while. I don't remember exactly the history, but certainly when Jishu died I dropped out of the scene for about a year or so. So I dropped the ball in terms of the Zen Peacemaker Order at that time. And Eve Marko, who I'm now married to, sort of convinced me to come back in, after about a year. And I did. But I had dropped the whole working on building up the Zen Peacemaker Order.

But, not everybody had dropped it. There were people being ordained as Zen Peacemaker Priests around the world. But there was no connections. I didn't know about this. And they didn't know. Joan Halifax probably inducted around 500 people into the ZPO. I doubt if they knew each other. I certainly didn't know who they were. And in Europe this was happening. We had founding teachers for ZPO in the States and also in Europe.

And about three years ago Roshi Egyoku asked me, "What's happening with ZPO?" I said, "Well, nothing that I know of. I mean there's a lot happening, but I don't know." And she said that she feels that what she's been developing here, the principles within the Zen Peacemakers Order fit much more than the Japanese principles that we had both studied. And she was interested in reviving, putting energy into it. I said, "Great, so let's do that." So around three years ago, two years ago, (I can't remember exactly when.) we started to do that. We put out an initial document. And one of the things we said in that initial document is that we were organizing according to a method of circles, and peer relationships. And that I would be in the International Circle serving as a steward of the vision of ZPO.

And it was just a few weeks ago that I realized that this vision of ZPO is not stated anywhere. Or at least my vision of it. We have a small vision statement. But my vision of ZPO is not stated anywhere. And it felt very important that I put out what I think, or what my vision is. And I also invite some of the major players, like Roshi Egyoku to share her vision. And then we'll put this up on the web, and the circles can discuss Bernie's Vision, and Wendy Blue's Vision, and Joan Halifax's Vision—the vision of the different people. And then we can discuss it further.

But I would still at this point be the steward of that vision. My personal feeling—I haven't mentioned this, and what I haven't shared yet is that in about a year I would like to replace myself as the steward of the vision of ZPO with a group of three Spirit Holders. Because part of the vision, part of my vision of ZPO is that it not be a hierarchical organization. And I've heard some people say that they want to join ZPO because they want to support Bernie, or be part of what Bernie's doing. And I don't want that to be a reason to join ZPO. That's the old hierarchical sense, and I'd rather move us out of that before I die. Obviously after I die that can't be a reason for joining. So I want to move us out of any one person making any or all of these decisions. But for the first year I will hold that position of Steward of the vision.

So let me share what my vision is.

My vision is that the Zen Peacemaker Order would be a collection of folks who are meditators—that's one. And in each of the things that I mention, I would also say what happens if you eliminate that as a core of Zen Peacemaker Order? Could you still call it a Zen Peacemaker Order? And for me if somebody wants to be a member, but doesn't want to be involved in meditation, I would say, "This is the wrong group for you." We are all meditation students. And we share that, and that's something we can discuss.

My vision includes the Zen Peacemaker Order functioning with the principles of the Three Tenets of not knowing; bearing witness, and taking actions that arise out of that. And these Three Tenets, for me, I live my life that way. I don't do anything with a pre-set plan. I approach everything I do, including this talk, or including making love to my wife without coming to it with expectation, or a plan, or this is what's gonna happen. I bear witness to the situation, and I see what arises. I don't say, or I don't feel that what arises out of that practice is good or bad, or right or wrong, or any of that. It's just what arose.

So the next time I do something, again I approach it with not knowing. I bear witness, and then the actions. So if we took the Three Tenets out of the Zen Peacemaker Order, again I feel we don't have a Zen Peacemaker Order, we have something else.

One of the principles of the Zen Peacemaker Order is doing social action, being socially engaged on a volunteer basis. There are many people that have jobs where they are social workers, or whatever. I am looking at everybody within the Zen Peacemaker Order doing some volunteer work somewhere. And furthermore, doing that social action based on the Three Tenets. So everything that I'm going to talk about as something to be done within the Zen Peacemaker Order has to be done according to the Three Tenets.

And my own opinion is that if you do social action based on the Three Tenets, that is a practice towards enlightenment, or towards connecting with more of Indra's net. So the experience of enlightenment becomes deeper and deeper, as you connect with more and more of the net.

And again, if you took out social action, somebody say, "I want to be part of ZPO, but I don't want to do any of that social action," or, "I'm already a social worker. I don't need to do any volunteer work." Again, they're not fitting my sense of what it means to be part of the Zen Peacemaker Order.

Another element that we list as a core practice of the Zen Peacemaker Order, but for me it's part of the vision are what we call Bearing Witness Retreats. So these are generally retreats involving aspects of the net that we're not normally connecting with. And they're retreats that are structured according to the Three Tenets. All of the retreats that you've heard of us having have been structured according to the Three Tenets. Now we try to figure out what does that mean, and how do we structure a retreat that way?

What is a Bearing Witness Retreat will keep evolving. That is, in my opinion if you are working in hospice, say, and you are approaching people from the standpoint of not-knowing, you're not coming there with a plan of what you should do, or what should happen to the person that's dying, but you're not knowing, and you're bearing witness to the person, and then the actions arise. That's a Bearing Witness Retreat.

So Bearing Witness Retreats contain different flavors, but there's a similarity. They're structured according to the Three Tenets. And you're entering a realm that you're not fully connected in. And you're spending time bearing witness to that world.

So that's an important part. And we've already had meetings. Different meeting, and some people suggesting whether we should have Bearing Witness Retreats as a prerequisite. Again, for me, if you took Bearing Witness Retreats out of it, you don't have the Zen Peacemaker Order. And many people, including Rami, his first introduction to our world was he attended an Auschwitz Retreat. And many people that have attended these different retreats have become very active around the world. There's a whole core of people that are friends. They are in different sanghas, but they've become friends because they've gone through this deep experience of not knowing, and bearing witness in an environment where it really helps you to do that.

Also my vision is that it not be hierarchical. And I mentioned that before. So we've set up a governance system. And you can read about this, it's based on something called sociocratic, or sociocracy that was developed in Holland. And we've used it before. But we're using that as our governance system. And that consists of local circles, regional circles that invites people up to a national, continental circle, with representatives that bring information back and forth. And those continental circles flow their people into an international circle, with information flowing back. So there's information flowing backwards and forwards from all of these circles, and no one person in charge.

So at this point, to me, if you took out the peer style of governance, and replaced it with a common hierarchical style of governance, for me that's not the Zen Peacemaker Order. Another hierarchical thing is not what I had in mind.

So those are sort of the pieces of this vision, but an overall is an international sangha of people doing all these things, belonging to sanghas all around the world, or not belonging, individuals. Wanting friends to share their work, and what they're doing, and to talk, and to do trainings. So we have people, like this group, in a training on the Zen Peacemaker Order that's happening this weekend. And you've got people from around the United States coming to train here. That's not always that common, but within our family it's becoming more, and more common. And with the development of Zen Peacemaker Order, I think it will be even more common.

There will be people wanting to train in some of these things that maybe their sangha doesn't train in or maybe they don't have a sangha. Or even if they do, you'll see crossings. I would hope that somebody that's a member of ZPO here, and is deciding to take a trip to Europe (maybe going to Belgium, or to wherever you're going), you could look up and see what ZPO friends there are in Belgium, tell them you're coming for a trip, and that they would offer you a place to stay, or help you in your trip. That's real international sangha that we would be developing.

That's my start. Most of what I have discussed—maybe all—is in place. It's happening. And it will evolve through these peer groups. Right now we have peer groups, regional groups in southern Europe. And the southern Europe group represents Switzerland, Italy, Spain. And because we don't have enough groups, some other continents, we also have representation from Israel and Brazil. The northern group, circle, has representation from Belgium, Holland, France, Paris, Germany, I think Poland. And in the United States we have an East Coast, Eastern Region, Central, and a Western. And Roshi Egyoku is a steward of the Western Regional Circle.