

Bearing Witness to All of Life

by Roshi Bernie Glassman

[Published in *Lion's Roar*, January 2, 2018](#)

Dogen Zenji says of the first pure precept, “Ceasing from evil is the abiding place of laws and rules of all buddhas.” This abiding place is the state of nonduality, of not-knowing and nonseparation. The Sixth Ancestor of Zen defines zazen as the state of mind in which there is no separation between subject and object—no space between you and me, up and down, right or wrong. So we can also call this precept “Returning to the One.”

It's a very difficult place to be in, this place where we don't know what's right and what's wrong. It is the place of just being, of life itself. How many of us can say that we are open to all the ways of all lives? How many of us can say that we don't have the answer? How many of us can say that every way that's being presented is the right way?

Zen is a practice that pushes us to realize what is. To me, zazen is a form of bearing witness to life, of bearing witness to the elimination of the denial of the oneness of our life. As human beings, each one of us is denying something. There are certain aspects of life we do not want to deal with, usually because we are afraid of them. Sometimes it is society itself that is in denial.

Zazen allows us to bear witness to all of life. To me, that is the essence of the second pure precept, doing good. Dogen says, “Doing good, this is the dharma, supreme enlightenment. This is the way of all beings.”

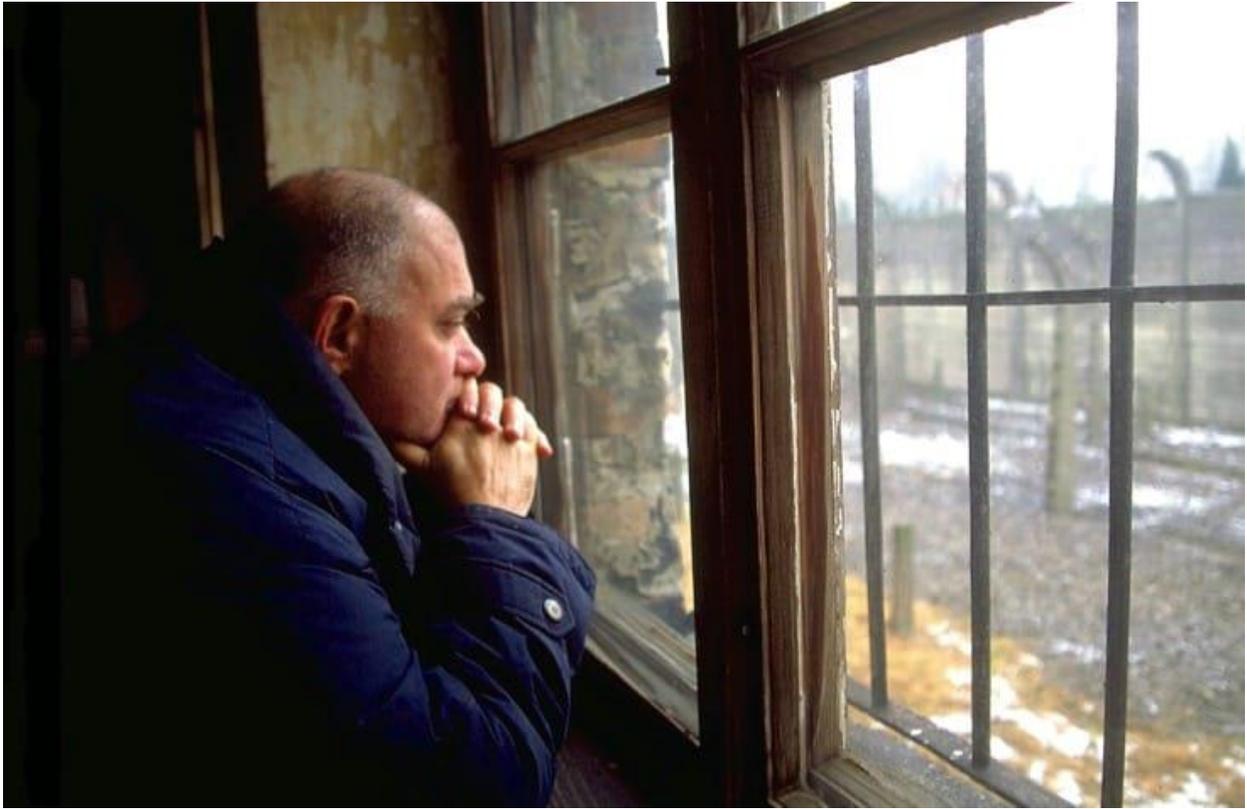
Bearing witness to things we are denying or that society is denying, bearing witness to the things we don't want to deal with— this is the second precept. When we bear witness, we open to what is, and we learn. The things that we are in denial about teach us. We don't go to them to teach them. When we can listen, when we can bear witness, they teach us.

For me, the flowering of zazen is the third pure precept, doing good for others. Dogen says, “This is to transcend the profane and to be beyond the holy. This is to liberate oneself and others.” What good is it if we just make ourselves more holy? What's the point? The point is to serve, to offer, to be the offering. Of itself the fruit is born. So we don't have to worry about what to do. If we cease from evil, if we become that state of unknowing, if we become zazen, the offering will arise. The fruit will be born.

The question always comes up: how do we bring our Zen into our life? But Zen *is* life. What is there to bring? And into what? The point is to see life as the practice field. Every aspect of our life has to become practice.

I was trained in a traditional monastic model whose forms are conducive to the state of not-knowing. The question for me is, what forms can we create in modern society that will be conducive to seeing the oneness of life? What are the forms that will make it easier for us to experience that state of nonduality? Almost anything we do will cause more dualistic thinking. How do we lead ourselves, our brothers, and our sisters into a state of nonduality? That's the question. That's the koan.

Adapted from a dharma talk by Roshi Bernie Glassman.



Bernie Glassman meditating on the Holocaust at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Photo by Peter Cunningham.