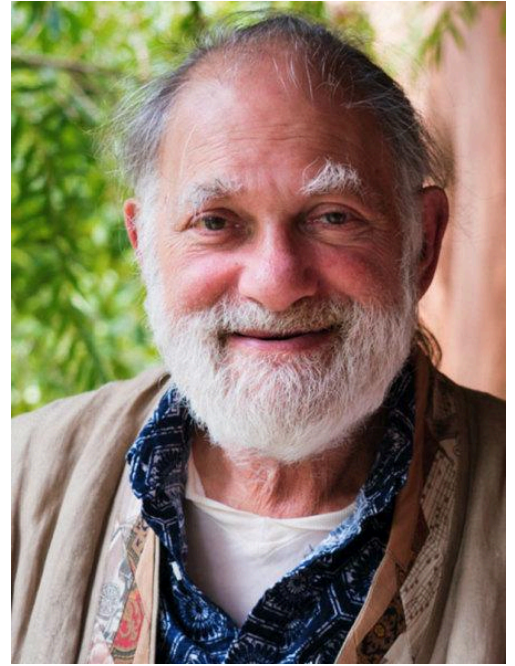


The Three Pure Precepts and Bodhidharma

by Bernie Glassman Roshi

When I was first taught the meaning of the word "kai" my teacher used the translation "aspects of life" instead of "precepts" and I prefer to think of the Kai as the aspects of our life. I would like to talk about this in the context of the Three Pure Precepts and a Koan. The Three Pure Precepts are Cease from evil, Do good, and Do good for others. The Koan is a simple one, the 4th case of the Gateless Gate. The main case, the koan itself, is one question; "Why does the Western barbarian have no beard?" As you probably know, it refers to Bodhidharma, who came from the west (India) to China. As you probably also know, one of the metaphors or expressions in our tradition that's very common is the question, "Why did Bodhidharma come to the East?" It's a metaphor for the question, "What is Zen?" We say that Zen is Kai, is life. So, what is this Zen? What is life we are talking about? If Zen is Kai, if it's life itself, then what's the point of talking about bringing it from one country to another? What are you transmitting? What is the Dharma torch that can't -shouldn't-be extinguished? These are the questions in that Koan. Of course, Bodhidharma is not some figure that lived many, many years ago.



Bodhidharma is us, all of us. It's our teachers that come from Japan, from the west, carrying the torch. It's all of us coming from wherever we came from, gathered here. Why did we come here? What are we carrying? What are our teachers carrying? What is it that we want to receive? And what is it that we don't want to receive?

There are a number of ways of looking at koans. One is that we use them to illustrate points. We talk about them. I'm using one now to illustrate something and I'm talking about it. Another, which has to do with actual koan practice, is to become the koan. In this case; Become the Western barbarian! Become the beard! Become Bodhidharma! To pass the koan is to experience the state that's being presented, being Bodhidharma.

This first condition of being brings us to the first Pure Precept, ceasing from evil. Dogen Zenji in his instructions on the Kai says about the first Pure Precept, "Ceasing from evil, this is the abiding place of laws and rules of all Buddhas. "This abiding place, this source, this is the state the koan wants us to experience, the state of non-duality, the state of not-knowing, the state of non-separation. The sixth ancestor in China, Hui-neng, defines Zazen as the state of mind in which there is no separation between subject and object, no space between I and Thou, you and me, up and down, right or wrong. This ceasing from evil, the abiding place is the state of at-one-ment, of being one, of being Buddha, of being the Three Treasures, of Be-ing, of returning to the One. That's a very difficult place to be in. This is the place where we don't know what's right, what's wrong. This is the place of just being, of life itself, of Kai itself. How many of us can say that we are open to all the ways of all lives, of all beings and

non-beings and spirits? How many of us can say that we don't have the answer, the right way? Or, 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 experience, to realize, to actualize, what is. We human beings possess a number of characteristics that separate us from that experience. One is the brain. The brain thinks dualistically. That's the way it functions. Concerning some parts of ourselves, for example our stomachs, we don't think dualistically. I don't go around being aware of having a stomach unless, of course, something is wrong with it. If I have pain, there is a sense of separation. If you experience the oneness of life, you would not ask the question "Is that the other or not?" If you experience the oneness of life, you would just function naturally.

Recently a term that has come up for me and seems to have a lot of meaning in my life is "bearing witness." For me, zazen becomes a form of bearing witness to the Three Treasures, bearing witness to life, bearing witness to the elimination of the denial of the oneness of our life. As human beings each one of us is denying something. Each one of us is aware of certain aspects of life which we do not want to deal with usually because we are afraid of them. Sometimes it's society that is in denial about certain of its aspects and we go along with it. Zazen in its true state allows us to bear witness to all life and, for me, that's the second pure precept, Doing Good. Dogen Zenji says, "Doing Good, this is the Dharma, of Samyak-sambodhi. This is the way of all beings."

A symptom of separation, a symptom of duality is found in the word "why". Many Koans start with that. "Why has Bodhidharma, the Western barbarian, no beard?" Why! That's the symptom of duality. Why do we put on the robe at the sound of the bell? Why do we do this, do that? Why do we need rules and regulation? Why do we need forms? Why this form? Why is grass green? Couldn't it be purple? I like purple. Grass is green therefore I don't like it. So why? Eliminate the word "why" and again we come back to bearing witness. Recently I thought of Shakyamuni's life and I thought of his father trying to isolate him from suffering, from old age and death, from renunciates. And for me that became a metaphor for the denial of, or separation from, those aspects of ourselves or of society that we are afraid of or not ready to deal with. These are all those things that lead to the aspects of myself that I've been in denial about and am afraid of and those aspects of society that I'm afraid of or deny.

For me the importance of bearing witness to what is denied grew out of my zazen, out of the bearing witness to life as a whole and what arose out of that. When I bear witness, I learn, I open to what is. There's a healing process in that. The root of the word "ceremonies" is this "healing" and for me one of the most important ceremonies is this bearing witness. This is all the second precept. Bearing witness to things that I am denying or that society is denying. Bearing witness to the things I don't want to deal with. So in terms of our Koan, being Bodhidharma, just feeling the beard, being the beard, we see all the problems-the food that gets stuck in the beard, the molds that grow. We learn how to clean it, how to comb it, how to become one with it, how to be Bodhidharma. Taking care. It's a tremendous healing and learning. The beard teaches us. And the things that we are in denial about teach us. We don't go to them to teach them. They teach us. And they teach when we can listen, can bear witness. And to bear witness is, again, to me zazen, being one with those things.

A student of mine is walking, along with 70 other people, from Auschwitz in Poland to Hiroshima, a 5,000 mile walk through many war-torn countries. He told me that one of the things that was happening on the walk was that many of the people with him were walking but not experiencing the suffering going on in those countries. They are doing it but staying out of it. They see soldiers and they are afraid to talk to them. They see prisoners and they're afraid to talk to them. He called it "spiritual correctness"- doing the right thing, but not allowing oneself to become it. That's a danger of our practice. We can learn all the right things. We can talk about all the right things, but not allow ourselves to be them.

For me the flowering of zazen, the flowering of bearing witness is the third Pure Precept, "Doing good for others." Dogen Zenji says, "This is to transcend the profane and to be beyond the holy. This is to liberate oneself and others." Many years ago in L.A. I had an experience in which I felt-I saw- the suffering of the hungry spirits. I was surrounded by all kinds of suffering beings. Almost immediately I made a vow to serve them, to feed them. How do we feed them? "Raising the Bodhi Mind, the supreme meal is offered" are words in our liturgy. That's the food for the hungry spirits. Raising the Bodhi mind the supreme meal is offered. So there are two parts of our practice: Raising the Bodhi mind, ascending the mountain is one, and the other is offering, descending the mountain. 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 out of our zazen, out of our bearing witness, we don't have to worry about what we do, if we cease from evil, if we become that state of unknowing. If we become zazen, the offering will arise. Fruit will be born. In fact, that's what each of us is. We can appreciate all the fruit in this wonderful garden that some call "the universe." There was a priest from Korea who started working with the children who were [developmentally disabled] orphans. And through the monastery he ordained the children. What was beautiful to me of what he said was that the children he worked with were Buddhas. He ordained them so he could take care of the Buddhas, not so he could make the children into something that we would accept. He accepted each child as he or she was, as the Buddha-and served and took care. It could also be said that in the eyes of the Buddha we are all [developmentally disabled]. In my case because of my Karma my life has evolved into working or trying to work with society as a whole, as a Dharma field. And I really feel it is directly out of that experience I had. And this leads me into what I do.

As I mentioned earlier the first pure precept, "Ceasing from evil," we can call returning to the One. And you know there is another famous Koan, "Where does the One return to ? " We answered it in the beginning and throughout this talk: The one returns to life. Zen is life. And if so, what can be excluded? Questions always come up, "how do we bring our zen into our life?" But Zen is life . What 's there to bring? into what ? So the point is to see life as the practice field. Every aspect of our life has to become practice. What is practice? In the work I do, I take that circle of life and I look at it in terms of the five Buddha families. That's just a scheme. My background was mathematics and I love schemes. You can have many different schemes for how to break up the circle of life. But for me I use the five Buddha families, our mandala. We call it the "The Greyston Mandala." In the center of the Mandala, the center of the circle, is the Buddha family, the formless forms, the state of non-duality, the first Pure Precept, non-knowing. It's the foundation of the network of the work we do that is represented by the other four families.

When we went to New York we first established the Buddha Family, the practice of zazen, the practice of meditation retreats, the establishment of an atmosphere of non-duality. The next family that we looked at was Ratna, "right livelihood." The next was the Karma family which I called "social action." Karma as you know is action, right action. The next was Vajra which I call "study" not study abstractly but study of life as it is, as we are doing it. And the fifth, Padma, I call "relationship" or "integration." It's the energy that keeps it all whole. As dualistically thinking human beings we think whatever we happen to be doing is the right thing. Nothing else is good. It's the same as we look at society. We create livelihoods and social action and we think, "oh, this is essence, not that" How to keep all this integrated as one circle of life—that's the Padma energy.

Being trained in a practice which comes out of a monastic model whose forms make the environment conducive to our getting to this state of not-knowing, to seeing the oneness of life, the question for me is what are the forms in business or social action that are conducive to seeing the oneness in society, in life? What are the forms that exist now? What keeps us from bearing witness? What keeps us from seeing oneness in life, from appreciating everything as it is? What is it that makes us move toward that conditioning of thinking that we know the right way? So my life at this point is dedicated to trying to create an environment, a form, not just for us as individuals, but for society, that deals with this issue. How do we create the forms that will be conducive to moving each of us towards the realization, the actualization of the enlightened way?

Just doing zazen doesn't necessarily lead into a position of non-duality. So what else can we do? It's the role of the teacher to try to answer this.

What are the "upaya," the methods, the expedient means? What are the forms that can help us get into that situation where it's easier for us to experience that state of non-duality? Almost anything we do will cause more dualistic thinking. So how do we lead ourselves, our brothers, our sisters into a state of non-duality? That's the question. That's Koan. I can give you as a concrete example a form that we created in business which I think helps people. Originally our businesses were places for training our residents. And that is still in some cases true. Then we opened our business to folks who were homeless and unemployed and very poor. The majority of our staff were folks who were either homeless or chronically unemployed or people that had tremendously high-paying jobs selling dope, crack. Some of these latter made a fortune and then on their own decided to change their lifestyle. We've hired many people like that. A lot of them come in with the notion that what they need are things for themselves. To help them get a glimpse of the interdependence of life we created teams of people working. How they get paid is a function of how their team produces. So if someone on the team doesn't know the job very well, it behooves the rest to teach that person, because then they all make more money. So we've created a form to bring their consciousness just a little bit away from thinking how they are going to improve for themselves. It's still how they are going to make money, but now it's in terms of the whole group. Moving people into the framework of seeing the interdependence of life then allows the next step to unfold the next and the next. So those are forms we've developed in addition to the practice of non-separation, of zazen. But that's the Koan; how do you do things like that? How do you do things in the monastery to make sure that you don't become attached to your way of doing it as the only way, the best way—so that everyone else out there who's

not doing it your way doesn't know what's "doing?" How do you do that? Those are, for me, the interesting questions.

To take another example, you know that "sesshin" means to unify the mind. I work with people who are homeless. For me that meant that I needed to try to unify the mind with those living in the streets. To do this I started giving street retreats. It isn't necessary, but I needed to do it. I have to make it clear that my doing street retreats was not doing a homeless retreat. Many people call these "homeless retreats," but to unify the mind with somebody homeless you have to be homeless. Everyone I took with me including myself knew that we were going back to our homes in a week. We were street people but not homeless people. The ceremony of ordaining "shuke tokudo" means "leaving home." So in some sense if one can really do shukke tokudo then you can do street retreats. But that's a separate story. So a street retreat is being at one with those living in the street. How do you know that? You live in the street. So that's what I did with everyone who came. We lived in the street. Now part of life is breathing, part of life is eating, part of life is doing zazen. I don't look at them as special. They are just what I do each day...I don't breathe to live. Because I'm alive I breathe. I don't do zazen to become something. Because I'm alive I do zazen. So a street retreat has all those elements. It involves eating, sleeping, and going to the bathroom. It has all the aspects of your life except you happen to be living in the street. So the rules change. There are no Bathrooms, no showers, no zafus, zabutons. You sit on the floor. We had no beautiful drums or robes, so we used garbage cans or whatever we could find for liturgy. But every day we had service. Every day we sat. But it was difficult, even just to get people together again after they had been separated to find food or bathrooms. I was amazed at what happened on that first street retreat. There were people who joined me, for example my senior disciple, my first Dharma successor, Peter Matthiessen who has done many things in his life and has probably done hundreds of sesshins. There are all kinds of people, some came for one day and some for five days, but every one of them told me it was the most powerful experience of their life. Something happened. I think it's the immediacy. Sesshin also brings us to the immediacy of life. But the street does it very, very dramatically. Issues of eating, peeing, defecating, every aspect of our life is raw and right there. And denial. One day on the street and people deny you. When you walk into a restaurant they won't serve you, won't let you in. When you have to go to the bathroom desperately, you go into a restaurant and ask if you can use the bathroom and they say no. People walk away from you because they don't like the way you smell or look. If you truly experience this, you will never avoid those people again, those people that were you. That's the power of the street and what it can teach, the immediacy of now. It teaches us to bear witness.

So if you can just feel his beard and see all its problems - the food that gets stuck in it, the mold that grows in it, its tangles - if you can see how to clean it, comb it and then become one with it, that's a tremendous healing and learning. The beard teaches and the things you are in denial about will teach you. They will teach you, if you can listen, bear witness and then become at-one with them. This is zazen. This is the Three Pure Precepts.