

Bernie Glassman's excellent adventure

The famed American Zen teacher,
clown, and social worker is thinking
big—again. Joan Duncan Oliver

Photographs by
Kuku Peter Cunningham

Bernie Glassman (*top*) with Kathe McKenna
and Roshi Paul Genki Kahn



Roshi Bernie Glassman celebrated his 70th birthday in January with three days of public reflection on his 50-year encounter with Zen. But even as he put a coda on five decades of Buddhist practice, America's best-known—and arguably best-loved—Zen master showed no signs of slowing down. In fact, the irrepressible social entrepreneur, who wrote the book on socially engaged Buddhism in the West—actually, three books—has dreamed up yet another venture: something he calls Zen Houses, residential dharma centers devoted to Zen practice and social service in impoverished areas. The first two houses are opening this spring.

Glassman has never been known to think small, and the Zen House movement is only part of the story. To staff these centers, Glassman has established a comprehensive seminary-and-internship program to train Buddhist clergy outside a monastic setting. What's more, he's formed an informal alliance with the august Harvard Divinity School, which will refer its graduates who seek ordination as socially engaged ministers to Glassman's Ministry Program for Leadership in Socially Engaged Buddhism. Now midway through its first year of operation, the program is headquartered at the 34-acre farm in Montague, Massachusetts that is home to "Roshi Bernie," as everyone calls him, and the Zen Peacemakers, a global organization integrating Zen practice, social action, interfaith work, and the arts that he launched in 1980.

It's all part of Glassman's mission to train the next generation of socially engaged practitioners and encourage the creation of new forms of practice-based service. Under the aegis of the Maezumi Institute, the Zen Peacemakers' study and practice arm, the leadership training gives would-be Zen ministers the tools and know-how to set up and run social service projects—notably, Zen Houses—in underserved locales.

The pioneering class of three men and three women, ranging in age from 26 to 65, has just completed seminary—four months of residential study—and is beginning phase two of the program: a six-month internship helping set up the first Zen Houses. (At the

end of year one they'll be eligible for a certificate in Socially Engaged Buddhist Ministry and, after an additional year of service in a Zen House, eligible for full ordination.) Meanwhile, this April, the second group of students starts seminary at Montague Farm.

Although they're grounded in lineage-based Zen teachings and practice, both the curriculum and the service commitment are distinct from traditional monastic training. The focus of the ministry program is not on liturgy but action. As Roshi Paul Genki Kahn, a Glassman dharma heir who directs the Maezumi Institute and the new training program, explains, "Our training is what I call 'the severe discipline of worldly life.'"

While ministerial graduates will lead meditation and give dharma talks, they'll also function as the Buddhist equivalent of Christian and Jewish clergy, performing marriages and funerals, offering pastoral care and counseling, serving as chaplains in hospitals and hospices. Above all, the Zen ministers will take their practice to the streets, establishing facilities, services, and businesses aimed at alleviating suffering.

Zen House directors will decide what services to provide and how to deliver them based on the needs of their communities, while the Maezumi Institute will provide ongoing supervision and advanced training and retreats for the staff. What distinguishes the Zen House model from the typical social agency approach is what Kahn calls "a marriage between the leader's talents and the locale." Zen ministers will go into a community not as outsiders with a preset agenda but as residents and active participants in local life, serving from within. "I'm not into missionary work," Glassman emphasizes.

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“We won’t open a Zen House unless we have someone appropriate to that area to run it.” Ideally, someone indigenous to the region. Steven Kanji Ruhl, who’s setting up the first Zen House—in the rural Appalachian region of central Pennsylvania—is fifth-generation Appalachian and seventh-generation Pennsylvanian, and grew up in one of the counties he’s serving.

Glassman is known for just this sort of total immersion approach—a “plunge” into a novel, challenging situation that offers opportunities for practice. Both the seminary and the Zen House rest on the Three Tenets, the core principles of Zen Peacemaker work: Not Knowing, Bearing Witness, and Loving Action. A sign outside Glassman’s office attests to his commitment to the tenets (as well as to his puckish sense of humor and willingness to play the holy fool: he attended clown college and still sports a red clown nose when the situation calls for it). Below each of the posted tenets is a “translation” in the form of a quote from *lebowskifest.com*, a website for fans of *The Big Lebowski*, a cult classic Coen

The essence of not knowing, according to Glassman, is suspending certainty and preconceived ideas. Then comes bearing witness—listening deeply to the situation, to discover what, or even if, action is warranted. What the leadership program provides is often likened to the Buddha Hotei’s bag of treasures: “We wanted the students to have a lot of tools and a lot of information, but to be able, when they go to work in an area, to be completely open to what’s happening there, not coming in with some idea of how they’re going to ‘fix’ things,” Glassman says. “The second very important thing is to look at a situation holistically: the community and the people involved, the individuals and their families. We use the five Buddha families as a matrix, a way of looking at the whole picture.”

In this model, based on the five aspects of the enlightened mind, the Buddha family represents the spiritual composition of a community, and the Ratna family the resources or economic situation. “I really push the creation of jobs and work in depressed areas,”



“Training practice should be throughout all of life,” says Bernie Glassman, “not just when you come to the zendo.”

Brothers film starring Glassman’s friend (and fellow Buddhist practitioner) Jeff Bridges:

Not Knowing, thereby giving up fixed ideas about myself and the universe.
The Dude is not in

Bearing Witness to the joy and suffering in the world
The Dude abides. . .

Loving Action
Healing myself and others
Enjoyin’ my coffee

Glassman says. The Vajra family focuses on education, and the Karma family on social service—not just what the Zen House can do for the community but what the community can do for itself. (Community-building comes under the heading of the Padma family, the sphere of relationships and integration.)

The overarching aim is realizing the oneness of life. For Zen House clients, Glassman says, “their immediate concerns are always themselves and their families, but if you help them see how they’re related to their community, their state, their country, the world, it opens up their scope. That’s part of what I would call the *upaya* [skillful means] of learning how we are connected—one body. It’s not just through meditation that you see that.”

The Zen House idea came to Glassman in the 1980s, after his first street retreat, when he and some students lived without money or shelter on the Bowery—then New York’s skid row—for a firsthand experience of homelessness. “One thing that struck me,” Glassman recalls, “was that the only groups that were helping there were Christian. Afterward I said I’d like to open a Buddhist place doing that.” Today, his goal is “to open Zen Houses in all the impoverished areas.”

The prototype for the Zen Houses—albeit on a grander scale—is the Greyston Mandala, the network of not-for profit and for-profit enterprises in Yonkers, New York, that Glassman began assembling in the early 1980s. A mandala, as the Zen Peacemaker website defines it, “represents the primary realization of Zen, the ‘circle of life,’ the oneness and interconnectedness of all creation.” What began as a training vehicle for Glassman’s Zen students expanded into a loose coalition of projects addressing critical needs in the community, includ-



ing low-cost housing, a for-profit bakery providing jobs and training, an after-school program, health care, and child care facilities.

Glassman’s new ministry program grew out of his relationship with Harvard Divinity School, where for the past two years he has been an adjunct instructor. The Buddhist track is the fastest-growing track within the ministry program at the Divinity School, according to Janet Gyatso, Hershey Professor of Buddhist Studies, and socially engaged Buddhism has attracted wide student interest. Steve Ruhl, a 2008 HDS graduate, wrote his thesis on inventing a new form of Zen Buddhist ministry in America and was among a group of students who brainstormed ideas for creating a Buddhist

ministry program with Gyatso, a longtime Tibetan Buddhist practitioner, and Cheryl Giles, a Vipassana practitioner who is Frances Greenwood Peabody Professor of the Practice in Pastoral Care and Counseling. Ruhl was the first HDS graduate to go on to Glassman’s program.

In many ways, Ruhl is the ideal person to launch a Zen House. For Glassman’s first Harvard course, he wrote a paper that fleshed out the Zen House concept. With 20 years of Zen study in the U.S. and Japan, Ruhl is the sort of mature and motivated practitioner Glassman and Kahn envisioned to lead a Zen-based start-up. After working with the developmentally disabled and as a writer and newspaper reporter, Ruhl earned a B.A. with honors from Penn State in 2005 at age 50—the first in his family to attend college—before going on to Harvard.

Ruhl is starting off the Appalachian Zen House with four programs, including one he calls “Green Appalachia.” A joint effort with Ahimsa Village, a local intentional community, it will provide environmental education for low-income kids and, later, eco-tourism and organic farming, to provide jobs and access to healthy food. He is also offering “Speak Your Peace”—a training in community building and conflict resolution—and is initiating multifaith outreach to address homelessness in the area, as well as establishing a “floating zendo.” All that’s missing is a house. “We’re using the term ‘house’ as a rubric to encompass all these components,” Ruhl says.

Clearly a Zen House rests on another sort of foundation, one built on the wealth of practical information and spiritual support provided by the ministry program. The four-month residential portion is exhaustive—six-day weeks of nonstop classes, workshops, and retreats taught by Glassman, Kahn, and senior teachers like Glassman’s wife, Eve Myonen Marko, a founder of the Zen Peacemaker Order, and the resident teacher at the Mother House Zendo in Montague; business development expert and dharma holder Mark Mininberg; and Fleet Maull, a well-known prison dharma activist who teaches in the M.A. in Engaged Buddhism program at Naropa University. The coursework covers everything necessary to set up and run both not-for-profit and for-profit organizations, from budgets, business plans, fund-raising, and project management to sustainable leadership, the marketplace, ministerial arts, and community building. Supplementing this is training in counseling techniques, Marshall Rosenberg’s Nonviolent Communication, and council circle. Last fall, students also received an all-expenses-paid nine-day intensive at Byron Katie’s School for The Work in California, immersing themselves in an

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(continued from page 65) intense self-inquiry process that complements Zen. Throughout the seminary training, the students sit three meditation periods a day.

It was the Peacemaker legacy of Zen practice coupled with social service that attracted 28-year-old Jeremy “Bear” Wardle to the ministry program. “If you look at the work that Bernie has done, it’s real engagement,” says Wardle, a Cherokee Pipe Carrier, aikido master, social activist, and teacher who has practiced Zen since his early teens. “The notion of bringing Zen out of the monasteries and temples, and making practice alive and vibrant in the world just makes sense to me. What else is the point of Buddhist practice if we don’t do that?”

The opportunity for personal development can be as enriching as the practical input. “One thing I love is that Roshi and Genki have found all these other upayas for dealing with your own emotions and helping other people, like Nonviolent Communication and The Work, that integrate really well with Zen training,” says 26-year-old Ari Pliskin. A youth leader since his teens, Pliskin is considering starting an urban Zen House for underprivileged young people.

Cynthia Seiho Brighton, a priest in the High Mountain Crystal Lake Zen Community in New Jersey, where Genki Kahn is spiritual director, says she’s “seen a lot of shifts” in her practice since the program began. “When I first came I thought, ‘I’m a 60-year-old woman. I’ll be good in the office. I can help somebody else start a Zen House.’ I think it was about a month into the training—with Genki telling me I was full of beans—when I realized that yes, I do have the ability and the desire to do this work.”

Partnering with existing programs in a community is a key part of setting up a Zen House. Brighton is joining forces with Kathe McKenna, founder of Haley House, a 43-year-old nonprofit in Boston that’s not unlike Greyston: it runs a soup kitchen, low-income housing, an organic farm, and an inner-city bakery café with a thriving arts program, job training, and a cooking school for at-risk teens. The Zen House will occupy space in a building that already houses a small residential community. Brighton plans to offer an introduction to Zen while she immerses herself in the neighborhood to see what projects will best serve Zen House clients. Haley House was founded in the Catholic Worker tradition of Dorothy Day, but McKenna has been practicing

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Tibetan Buddhism for 20 years and welcomes the Buddhist connection.

When Haley House opened in 1966 in Boston's South End, the neighborhood was a slum. Today, it's one of the city's trendiest—and priciest—areas, but the soup kitchen has stayed. “We felt it was very important for a soup kitchen to remain in an affluent neighborhood,” McKenna says. “We have to be able to see suffering to be reminded of it.”

Haley House is a good place to put Buddhist social service into action. “We’re incorporating the opportunity to do practice into the same setting where we do service,” McKenna explains. “That’s the reason for coming off the mountaintop: the service will inform the practice. For me, living and working side by side with the guys in the soup kitchen breaks down the ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality.”

Brighton adds, “There’s no distinction there between the servers and those being served.” A former professional dancer, she ran her own dance center in New Hampshire for 20 years before moving to New Jersey and diving into Zen practice. Her husband, also a practitioner, is so inspired by the Zen House concept that he’s planning to retire as a biochemist, move to

Boston, and open an orchid business—he’s an avid breeder and orchid-show judge—that will provide job training for Zen House clients.

Glassman has that effect on people: you want to drop whatever you’re doing and follow the call. The extent of his social service activities is unrivaled in American Buddhist circles. For the past quarter century, “Bernie has remained steadfast in his commitment to the poor and the marginalized,” notes Christopher Queen, lecturer on religion and dean of students in the Division for Continuing Education at Harvard, who has edited four seminal books on engaged Buddhism. Glassman prefers the term *socially* engaged Buddhism: “When people say ‘engaged Buddhism,’ there is an implication that other forms aren’t engaged. You can be politically engaged, monastically engaged—they’re all engaged, just different forms. So I say ‘socially engaged.’”

Social engagement wasn’t part of Glassman’s early Zen training. After studying and meditating on his own, he began practicing with Taizan Maezumi Roshi in 1967, taking off a week a month from work as an aeronautical engineer at McDonnell-Douglas to sit sesshins at the Zen Center of Los Angeles, and eventually becoming Maezumi’s senior dharma heir. As the

monk Tetsugen, Glassman followed a traditional path of koan study and rigorous practice. Then one day, during a carpool ride to work, he had a life-changing awakening. Sensing the presence of hungry ghosts all around him and experiencing them as aspects of the suffering of the world, Glassman “realized that all those aspects were me.” That awareness led him to interfaith work and social action. “I never stopped sitting and doing retreats, but it just expanded the notion that training practice should be throughout all of life, not just when you come to the zendo,” he says. “The ‘gen’ in my dharma name, Tetsugen, is often translated as ‘mystery,’ but it literally means ‘those things that are so close to you, you can’t see them.’ So that’s been my search always: What are the aspects of life I don’t see? And that’s led me to all kinds of new forms of practice like the street retreats or [retreats at] Auschwitz [concentration camp]. If I run into things I don’t understand, I need to sit with that until I grok what’s going on.

“I’m a constant student,” Glassman continues. “Maybe that’s why I’ve done so many different things. As I clarify, I look for people to be in charge of those projects. And then I seek the new.”

These days, students in the Socially Engaged Ministry program are beneficiaries of the wisdom and compassion accrued in Glassman’s search. “Some scholars have been talking about socially engaged Buddhism as another turning of the wheel of dharma,” Bear Wardle notes. “This program is one of the markers of that wheel making a full rotation.”

Christopher Queen likes to call engaged Buddhism the fourth Yana. “People always say to me, ‘Why do you need a fourth Yana? Social action is second and third Yana [Mahayana and Vajrayana]—the bodhisattva path.’ The problem is, if you look at the great Mahayana sutras, they’re all about vowing to help the world and intensifying your intuition of emptiness, but they never spell out what the bodhisattva is actually going to *do* in the world. I really think Buddhism had to go to a new level, which is what are the *practices* of the bodhisattva vow?”

That’s just what Glassman’s socially engaged ministers-in-training are finding out. ▼

For information on the Ministry Program for Leadership in Socially Engaged Buddhism, see zenpeacemaker.org.
