

Instructions to the Cook

A Zen Master's Lessons for Living a Life that Matters

By [Roshi Bernie Glassman](#) and [Rick Fields](#)

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As those familiar with Dogen's [Instructions to the Tensho](#) know, the cook is considered to be the most important person in the monastery because he is responsible for the welfare of all the other monks. Like Dogen, Roshi Tetsugen Glassman believes that one of the most useful metaphors for life is what happens in the kitchen. Indeed, Zen masters call a life that is lived fully and completely, with nothing held back, "the supreme meal." So the "menu" of Glassman's new book, [Instructions to the Cook](#), which describes his vision and his work, is divided into the five main "courses" or aspects of life: [spirituality](#), [knowledge](#), [livelihood](#), [social action](#), and [community](#).

In it, Glassman draws upon Dogen's precepts to tell the story of the Zen Center of New York and the Greyston mandala of businesses and not-for-profits, which seeks to integrate the economic, social, educational, and spiritual dimensions of each endeavor. Rick Fields is a contributing editor to Tricycle.

When [13th-century Zen master] Dogen asked the Zen cook in the Chinese temple why he didn't have his assistants do the hard work of drying mushrooms in the hot sun, the cook said, "I am not other people." In the same way, we have to realize that this life is the only life we have. It's ours, right now. If we don't do the cooking ourselves, we are throwing our life away. "Keep your eyes open," Dogen instructs. "Wash the rice thoroughly, put it in the pot, light the fire, and cook it. There is an old saying that says, 'See the pot as your own head, see the water as your lifeblood.'"

When we cook—and live—with this kind of attention, the most ordinary acts and the humblest ingredients are revealed as they truly are. "Handle even a single leaf of a green in such a way that it manifests the body of the Buddha," says Dogen. "This in turn allows the Buddha to manifest through the leaf."

TRANSFORMATION

Cooking, like life, is about transformation. When we cook, we work directly with the elemental forces of fire and heat, water, metal, and clay. We put the lid on the pot and wait for the fire to transform the rice, or we mix the bread with yeast and put it in the oven to bake. There is something hidden, almost magical about it.

This kind of transformation involves a certain amount of faith. We work hard to prepare the food. We wash the rice, knead the bread, and break the eggs. We measure the ingredients carefully. We mix, stir, blend. But then we have to wait. We have to let fire and water transform the food we've prepared.

But we also have to keep an eye on things. We have to be aware of what is going on. For the Zen cook the old adage, “A watched pot never boils,” is only half-true. We leave the lid on the pot most of the time. But we also lift the lid every once in a while to taste the food.

The Zen cook follows the [middle way](#). We have faith that the soup is coming along—but we still check now and then.

The accomplished Zen cook is something of an alchemist. He or she can transform poisons into virtues.

The Zen cook doesn’t do this by adding a secret ingredient, but by leaving something out. The Zen cook leaves out attachment to the self.

For example, anger is considered a poison when it’s self-motivated and self-centered. But take that attachment to the self out of anger and the same emotion becomes the fierce energy of determination, which is a very positive force. Take the self-centered aspect out of greed and it becomes the desire to help. Drop the self-orientation from ignorance, and it becomes a state of unknowing that allows new things to rise.

INGREDIENTS

How do we find the ingredients? We simply open our eyes and look around us. We take the materials that are at hand, right in front of us, and prepare the best meal possible. We work with what we have in each and every moment.

Our body is an ingredient. Our relationships are ingredients. Our thoughts, our emotions, and all our actions are ingredients.

The place we live, the leaves that fall, the haze around the moon, the traffic in the city streets, the corner market—all these are also our ingredients. In order to see the ingredients in front of us, we have to open our eyes. Usually we create our own boundaries, our own small view, our own territory and that’s the only place we look. With practice, our territory expands and all the objects of the world become our ingredients.

As we see ourselves as the world, as we see the oneness of life, the whole world becomes available. Then the Zen cook knows that every aspect of life is an ingredient of the supreme meal.

USE EVERYTHING

Our natural tendency is not to use ingredients we think might ruin our meal. We want to throw them away or maybe move them way back on the shelf, out of sight, behind everything else. But Dogen instructs us to take the ingredients we think are going to ruin our meal and figure out how to use them so that they improve it.

If something doesn't seem to work as a main course, for example, it might become an appetizer or a dessert. You can't just say, "I don't want it to be like that. I'll leave it out on the table." That's a kind of denial. It's going to be there, whether you like it or not.

Take a group of people starting a new company. Their first step might be to take an inventory of their gifts. But if you decide you don't want the gifts one person has, you could be creating a problem because his or her gifts are part of the company. In any case, that person's gifts will wind up getting used because they are part of the person. The question is, how to use them. If you don't find a way, the person will end up jealous or resentful or bored. The unused gifts will wind up working to rot the company from the inside.

Let's say, for example, that someone is aggressive. But that energy might be just what's needed for certain difficult jobs—dealing with recalcitrant bureaucrats, for example. Or perhaps someone is so preoccupied with details that they are unable to see the larger picture. You wouldn't put that person on your five-year planning committee. But they might be perfect as an accountant keeping track of daily receipts.

Sometimes it might seem that we can't find a way to use someone's particular qualities which may seem toxic or harmful to our goal. In that case, we make a clear decision not to use their particular ingredient in the meal we are cooking. But we don't ignore or deny the ingredient. We acknowledge it, we're aware of it, we may even appreciate it in another context. But we just decide to use zero amount of it at the moment.

CLEANING KITCHEN IS CLEANING MIND

Right now, right in front of us, we have everything we need to begin.

Usually when we want to begin a new project—whether it be a new business or a new relationship or a new life—we're in a hurry. We want to jump right in and do something, anything. But the Zen cook knows that we can't prepare a meal if the kitchen is cluttered with last night's dishes. In order to see the ingredients we already have in our lives, we need to clear a space. "Clean the chopsticks, ladles, and all other utensils," Dogen advises. "Handle them with equal care and awareness, putting everything back where it naturally belongs."

So we always begin by cleaning. Even if the kitchen looks clean, we still have to clean it again each time we want to start a new meal. It's like taking a glass from the cupboards. We wipe it off before giving it to a guest.

The cleaning process itself changes the cook as well as the surroundings and the people who come into those surroundings – whether we're in a Zen meditation hall, a living room, a kitchen, or an office. That is why so much emphasis is placed on cleaning in a Zen monastery.

It doesn't matter whether we think anything is dirty or not. We just clean. The process of cleaning also allows us to discover the ingredients that are already in this space. We begin to see the ingredients we already have. Before we start to reclean the shelves, for instance, we have to take out the jars. In doing so, we see all the jars we have, and find that some are empty, some are almost empty, and others are

full. We find out what we don't need, what we have too much of, what's been spoiled, and what needs to be thrown away.

Of course, cleaning is an ideal that is never satisfied. Therefore, because we can't fully clean, what we have left becomes part of the ingredients of each new meal. Because we can't clean that glass, our new actions are pre-conditioned by that dirty glass. So we practice to make each new action as clean and unconditioned as possible.



Brown Bowls (detail), by Jan Hashey. Magic marker and carbon on paper, 1990.

CLEANING THE MIND

Our lives work the same way. Just as we start cooking a meal by cleaning the kitchen, it's helpful to start the day by cleaning our mind. In Zen Buddhism, we clean the mind by the process of meditation, or *zazen*, which literally means "just sitting."

For me, *zazen* is an activity like sleeping, eating, drinking, and going to the bathroom: if I don't take care of these natural functions, I will feel a difference in myself. If I don't eat, for example, I start getting very hungry, and if I don't sleep, I feel tired. And if I don't sit, my stability decreases, and I feel uncentered.

We don't practice to attain enlightenment, just as we don't eat or breathe to be alive. Because we're alive, we breathe. Because we're alive, we eat. Because we're enlightened, we do *zazen*. Dogen says that *zazen* is a manifestation of the enlightened state. We practice and recognize everything we do as a manifestation of the enlightened state.

The basic ingredients are very simple:

A space to meditate in.

A cushion or chair to meditate on.

And your body and mind.

Choose a time of day when your chances of being interrupted are minimal—early morning, before most people have gotten up, for example.

Find a space that is quiet, not too dark or too light, and where you are not likely to be disturbed. If necessary, close the door.

Make the space aesthetically pleasing. Depending on your taste, include an inspiring image, or a natural object such as a beautiful rock or flower. Candles and incense are optional as well.

Wear comfortable, non-binding clothes.

Assume a comfortable position. Back erect and without tension. Do not lean against the wall or the back of the chair.

Place your right hand up on your lap and left hand palm up on your right hand, thumbs slightly touching. This position is called the cosmic mudra and creates a restful environment for the mind.

If you are sitting on a chair, place your feet squarely on the ground with knees approximately six inches apart.

If you are sitting on a cushion (a folded blanket will also do nicely), adjust the height of the cushion so that both knees rest firmly on the ground. The equilateral triangle formed by this position gives support to both the back and spinal column.

Let your eyes remain half-closed, half-open, lightly resting on a spot on the floor approximately three feet in front of you. This will allow your eye muscles to relax while you keep an alert state of mind.

Place the tip of your tongue at the top of your palate, behind your top front teeth. Keep your mouth closed and breathe through the nose.

Concentrate on your breathing. Notice inhalation and exhalation. As you inhale, count one. As you exhale, count two. Continue to ten and then repeat, from one to ten again.

As thoughts arise, let them come and go. Keep your attention on the counting. When you notice that thoughts have distracted you and you have lost your count—gently return to the counting. Start over at one.

Continue for a minimum of two and a maximum of thirty minutes.

Repeat daily, or at least once a week.

[Roshi Bernie Glassman](#) first dharma successor of Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi Roshi, was the abbot of Zen Center of Los Angeles, the first abbot of the Zen Community of New York and co-founder of the Greyston Mandala. In 1994 he conceived the Zen Peacemaker Order.

[Rick Fields](#) (1942–1999) was a contributing editor to *Tricycle* and the author of *Chop Wood, Carry Water*; *The Code of the Warrior*; (with Bernie Glassman) *Instructions to the Cook*; and the well-known history of American Buddhism, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*.