

“Instructions to the Cook: A Zen Master’s Recipe for Living a Life that Matters”

Discussion Guide

This guide is meant to encourage reflection and discussion in classrooms and among small groups viewing the film. In this kind of discussion, all inputs or comments are welcome and respected. This guide can be used after each of the DVD chapters, or after viewing the entire film.

Chapter 1: Opening - Living a Life that Matters

In the opening scene, off-camera voices respond to the question “What is it to live a life that matters?”

How would you answer that question?

How did you react to some of the answers in the film?

Chapter 2: The First Course - Recipes for Spirit

The Making of a Zen Cook

What distinguishes Zen Master Bernie Glassman in his approach to both cooking and Zen practice? The metaphor of preparing and cooking a meal is used throughout the film. How was or wasn’t this metaphor useful for your reflections?

Chapter 3: Beginner’s Mind

How would you describe the tenet of “not knowing?” How can one get to a state of “not knowing” which is also called “beginner’s mind”? Bernie says, “don’t come to a situation attached to one particular language or one particular idea or way of doing things.” How can one do this? What are the benefits of not being attached to one mindset, idea, or way of being?

Chapter 4: The Second Course - Recipes for Learning

Cleaning the Kitchen is Cleaning the Mind

“So when you start to cook, when you start to do anything, if you can take as the metaphor “cleaning the space”, meaning that you are not attached to a particular thought or item”.

The basic tenets that Bernie mentions are: not knowing, bearing witness, and loving action. How does “not knowing” relate to this metaphor of “cleaning the kitchen is cleaning the mind?” How difficult is it to “clean the mind” when meditating, praying, or simply reflecting? How does it make sense to clean the kitchen and the utensils when they have already been cleaned? Do we often come to the making of a meal or a new project or meditation, with preconceived ideas about what is to be made or accomplished? How can we be “open” to these experiences?

Chapter 5: Basic Ingredients

Bernie entered the kitchen and looked in the refrigerator with beginner’s mind. He had no fixed idea what he would cook until he saw what ingredients were actually available. Many times we do not do things because we claim or think that we do not have the right ingredients. How does Bernie address this? What does he mean about working even with the ingredients that we think are not there?

Chapter 6: How to Cook

What does it mean to understand what the ingredients are saying to me?

How does this apply to the tenet of “bearing witness?”

Chapter 7: The Third Course: Recipes for Livelihood

“We don’t live to eat. We eat to live. In the same way, our livelihood exists to support our life, not the other way around.”

How do you understand this statement?

Chapter 8: Time and Money

In this section, Bernie gets very concrete about things that are necessary in life and in business. “Time and money are both essential ingredients in the meal of our life. None of us can do without them.” How do these essential ingredients often play out in life? How might we take a different view of these essential ingredients if we are striving “to live a life that matters?”

Bernie indicates that sometimes, when in business or in life, we need to expand our view of what is within our reach—if we only see ourselves, or our family and friends, as resources for the money we might need to start a business, then we are limiting ourselves. How can we expand our view to encompass many different areas or resources that seemed to be previously lacking?

Chapter 9: The Greyston Bakery

In envisioning the founding of The Greyston Bakery, what were some of the ingredients that were necessary for that start-up? In terms of money and resources, such as employees, how did this endeavor differ from more conventional businesses? Why is this important for a person or group striving to do social action that contributes to living a life that matters?

Chapter 10: The Fourth Course: Recipes for Social Change

Who are you cooking for?

“The Zen cook cooks for others because he or she sees that the separation between self and other is an illusion. We are all one, interconnected and interdependent.”

Who is Bernie cooking for? How has understanding this metaphor contributed to the socially responsible projects that Bernie and his foundation have been involved in? Why does this matter?

Chapters 11 & 14: Greyston Family Inn and Issan House

Bernie discusses the social actions of the Zen Community as done because of the inherent “oneness or interconnectedness of life.” What do this statement mean? How did you see this in the sections on the Greyston Family Inn (the Day Care facility) and Issan House (the AIDS/HIV facility)?

Chapters 12 & 13: Baby Buddhas and That Ain’t Garbage

These two sections are closely related. Both deal with the marginalized, homeless children and children with developmental disabilities, as well as the discarded or ignored in our midst, the homeless, the addict, or the poor. Why does the Korean Zen priest call the children “Baby Buddhas?” How does the phrase “that ain’t garbage” help us to see others anew? How important is it that we discover that people and things “ain’t garbage?”

Chapter 15: The Fifth Course: Recipes for Community

Serving and Offering

“The Zen cook always gives an offering back to the community and the earth itself. We are always serving and receiving—it goes both ways.”

In the film, Bernie has prepared the meal and offers it to his guests. What is the significance of this offering? Why isn’t it just seen as a meal? And what happens when an unexpected visitor arrives? How does this then become a means of renewing the offering and serving?

Chapter 16: Indras’ Net

Indras’ Net is about the interconnectedness of life. Are we, and all things, really interconnected? Discuss how this is, in our families, neighborhoods, towns, nation, and world? Are we interconnected with the environment? How would you describe this interconnection?

Chapter 17: How to Eat

“When we offer and serve the supreme meal, we don’t just feed people or even teach them how to cook—we teach and inspire them to teach and inspire other people how to cook.”

Again, this is about the interconnectedness of life and the third tenet of these teachings: loving action. How does this come together: how is loving action seen throughout the film and finally in the meal that is offered and served? How is this simple action of preparing and serving a meal a metaphor for living a life that matters? How does it often play out in that growing net or web of interconnectedness? How could it play out?

Chapter 18: Clearing the Table and Starting Again.

What is the point of starting over again and again? How is the idea of the interconnectedness of life and loving action an on-going process?

Concluding Discussion Questions:

One of the tenets not discussed much has been “bearing witness” and yet it has a subtle presence throughout the film. How would you define “bearing witness?” And how was it demonstrated in the film?

Now that you have watched the film, take a look at the questions at the beginning of this guide, in Chapter 1, about living a life that matters. How would you answer that question, now?

Did the film help you to better understand the Zen approach to living a life that matters? If so, how did it help you clarify your thoughts?

What actions could you take to help you live a life that matters?

What do you take away from the film and its message?

Additional Scenes:

Zen Meditation:

According to Bernie, what is Zen meditation about? What are the three parts that Zen meditation is concerned with? And why?

Street Retreats:

According to Bernie, most people come to the street retreats concerned about food and fear of being assaulted. However, what are the two main experiences that retreat participants go away with? (lack of recognition and tiredness). Discuss how these were experienced and why? According to actor Ellen Burstyn, how does she now respond to the homeless whom she encounters on the street and why? How might you respond?

The Auschwitz Retreat:

What led Bernie to start this retreat? Who has come to this retreat?

How is Auschwitz a holy site? How is it a place for healing?