

Joseph Bobrow Roshi

*The True Person of No Rank: A Zen Story for Our Troubled World*

Week One: "Who is the True Person of No Rank?"

June 6, 2020



Hello, I'm Joseph Bobrow, Zen teacher, psychotherapist, writer, and community activist. I'm speaking to you this morning in the midst of the pandemic. To make this somewhat more personal, I want to let you know from where I'm speaking because otherwise, I'm just talking to a webcam in this experiment to record a Dharma Talk virtually. I'm speaking to you from the banks of the Los Angeles River, in the heart of the San Fernando Valley, on Valley Hard Drive, which is where I live. Lots of birds come down to this little creek and the jacaranda trees are blooming these days.

Our theme for today is a "The True Person of No Rank: A Zen Story for Troubled Times." This 'true person' is a translation and adjustment to the translation from the Chinese, a 'true man.' By introducing the word 'person,' I don't just do it for gender equality reasons, but it really opens up another horizon that I think is going to be important as we go on. Awakening and particularly living an awakened life, especially in this troubled world as we have today, requires a durable person with strong ego capacities.

The first talk will be about no self, the ancient Buddhist teaching at the heart of Zen and this true person of no rank. No self is fascinating to practitioners, but flummoxing. It's one of the three pillars of Buddhism along with *dukkha*, suffering, *anicca*, impermanence, and *anatta*, no self. Buddhism came into being in India in opposition to Hinduism, which posited *Atman*, a great self that included everything, a holy divine self. What is this no self and what are some of the misunderstandings, some of the hindrances, pitfalls, and potholes along the way?

The second talk will be about the person. I'll introduce an elegant, ancient Buddhist model, a formulation, that will help us wrap our minds around the person and the process of Zen training.

In the third talk, I'm going to be speaking about motivation and how motivation is the linchpin of how we distill our practice and embody our realization in daily living. I'll be coming at it in a somewhat different way than I think most of you have thought about it, and even how it's presented in classical and Zen Buddhist teachings.

Then in the fourth talk, going to be trying to bring it all together and talk about some of the myths of the awakened person and how they work, and how sometimes they create a bit of a drag on our walking the path, and how we can revisit them and renew them and an integrated, updated way that presents a more sustainable, human way of thinking about practice. practice for the long haul, practice as a living. So that's our agenda. That's our menu.

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Zen is a transmission beyond name and form. Words can conceal and reveal and words can become very saturated. So listen afresh. When we hear something, we all tend to fit it into categories that we already know. We think "Uh-huh, I know that." And it's understandable. That's just how we work. But I want to invite you into what we call "beginner's mind" in Zen. Everyone knows that phrase now, but I really want to invite you to set aside the knowing and open yourself to what we might kindle together, what we might learn together, hearing old things in new ways, perhaps opening up fresh perspectives. Imagine if you want to that I'm speaking just to you. Since this is somewhat abstract, talking to a webcam, we can get very personal that I'm addressing this to you.

This reminds me of a story about the first Zen master to come to America, Shaku Soen Roshi. He was asked by someone who met him at the World Conference of Religion in 1898 [sic] (World's Parliament of Religions of 1893). This person said, "I live halfway around the world, how can I practice? I feel so alone." Shaku Soen answered, "Imagine that you're sitting with all the beings on the earth."

So, here we are, isolated in a way but all of us sitting and practicing together. This is going to be a Zen story. What kind of a story? Stories get a little bit of a bad rap in spiritual circles these days. Sometimes we hear, "Oh, that's just your story, drop your story." Well, stories are really important! I'm using the word story as an organizing myth or implicit vision, or even more, a dream, a dream that infuses the way we walk the path. I like Dylan's line, "You can be in my dream if I can be in yours." So let's see if we can be in each other's dream as we construct a somewhat different version of Buddha's dream. This is Buddha's dream, but actually, it's Bobrow's dream. Bobrow dreaming Buddha. And you know something gets lost in there. But don't blame Buddha for Bobrow's dream. Nonetheless, I like to dream, so here goes.

Let's hear from one of the great ancient Zen masters, Linji [Yixuan], sometimes known as Rinzai. "There is a true person of no rank that is constantly coming and going from the portals of your face. Who is the true person of no rank?"

In Zen, we asked the ultimate questions. "What is life and death? What's the meaning of my being alive? And what is this? What is this very moment?"

Another of my favorite old Zen masters, Yunmen, writes like a grandmother—I mean, he's sort of handing it to us. "You have the one thing that matters. Each and every one of you. Its great function manifests without the slightest effort on your part. Take a step back, seek under your

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very feet. This very you standing before me without any form, shining alone. This can expound the dharma and listen to it." Do you feel some resonance without even necessarily knowing what he's referring to? I think we can start to feel a little resonance. 'What's he talking about? I have a half a hunch of what that is.' So we muster up our curiosity and dive in.

There's another koan about our original face. "Show me your original face before your parents were born." Have you heard about that one? Yeah. Yeah. It's not limited to our physical face for sure. You know, "no self" or this "true person of no rank" is something eminently real. And in this culture where reality is so corrupted, gaslighting prevails. You say one thing one day you say another thing the next day. Just because you say it, it's true. We have a thirst for something real. Even though the true person of no rank is not fixed and permanent, can't be grasped by words, at the same time, she's free. Right? The great function is working all the time. When it's cold, she puts on a coat. When it's warm, she walks outside and takes in the sunshine. When she's hungry, she gets some food without any effort. Isn't that a miracle? You stop and think about it in our myths. So this is the activity of no self.

No self is not a place. It's not a fixed structure. It's not something I can point to. It's an activity, we could say "true person activity." Now there are a couple of common misunderstandings of no self which I want to address in this talk. One is the equation of no self with selflessness. If selflessness is an established self-concept it can do just as much damage as self can. If selflessness is a living reality that includes but transcends self and no self, well, then it's maybe something else.

There's an Aboriginal elder who said, "If you come to help me, if you're coming to help liberate me, stay home. But if you understand that your liberation is bound up with my liberation, please come, and we'll do some work together." Gandhi was once asked, "Why do you keep helping all these people? It seems like it's inexhaustible, you never give up." He replied, "I'm working on my self-realization." So this idea of selflessness can lead to a kind of 'helping hand strikes again,' like our invasion of Iraq. We thought, "We're going to be greeted as saviors, we're going to be celebrated." Of course, that didn't work out that way. The people of Iraq and the beings of Iraq came to understand very, very well what our true motive was and they've suffered greatly from it. We'll look at motivation in the third talk.

So that's one equation that I think trips us up. The second is that we think no self is something called no self. I remember Masao Abe [SP?], this great Japanese philosopher and Zen man coming to the Maui Zendo about 40 years ago. Based on a few questions he got from us, after his

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talk, he said exactly that. He said, "No self... you keep talking about no self, but no self is not something called 'no self.'" No self is very dynamic. It's emergent and shifting. It's full of possibilities, and it's full of our distinctive qualities, even though we try to offload them. We try to evacuate our personal qualities thinking that that's going to help us along the way. This can often result in Zen zombies. It can result in a kind of flattening of affect, some Zen-ish way of being, as if we're all walking around with a broomstick up our you know what, looking very Zen-like.

I think the second part of the root of this and why we try to get rid of everything that we consider personal thinking it's going to help us become awakened is because we have an aversion or an allergy to "I," "me," and "mine," we equate it with something called ego. So I had somebody a few years ago, having a very powerful real experience. And as we were talking about it, he said, "But it all comes down to the self." And I said, "What?" I said, "That's a nice concept." And he was in the middle of a very real experience. And then I pointed that out. And he said, "Oh, I just mean it's all about the individual." And I said, "Well, that's that's also a very, very nice concept."

What was so difficult to say was that I am responsible. We are responsible, as if there's some allergy of saying we or I, as if it will mean that we're somehow ego-driven. And so no self is associated with this project of excising the "I" and the "me" and the "mine" and taking responsibility for not only our inner material but our way of being in the world. And again, I think we impoverish ourselves by doing that.

So what I'm talking about here, when I talk about no self and the true person of no rank, is a living embodiment of Buddhist teachings, a very human embodiment of Buddhist teachings, full of energy, full of diversity, refined through Buddhist practice and expressed very spontaneously in very simple natural ways. Not in a wild way, but in a spontaneously tutored way that we'll talk about when we talk about ethics and motivation.

So if the self isn't eliminated or offloaded, what happens to the self? Well, we change from a ghost into a person. In Japanese mythology, ghosts hover around bushes and grasses hungrily looking for something. This is tanha, this is craving, the second noble truth, the cause of suffering, sort of on the prowl for something outside of myself. This makes us ghostly. And what it is, of course, is that we're looking in the wrong places. We're looking in conceptual formulations and conceptual formulations don't fill the belly. Success, failure, enlightened, deluded, self, no self. It's an eternal game of ping pong. So we're grasping, and we don't see that

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self and no self are the same thing. Their conceptual formulation. When we begin to let go of our grasping to release our hold on this precious self-identity, it can be a little bit scary.

A while back, someone was talking about how much she wanted to dive into meditation. But when she began to meditate, she got very scared. There's some sense of identity that starts to quiver. To study Buddhism is to study the self, to study the self is to forget the self, not eliminate personal qualities or self experience. Certainly not to eliminate a sense of self which again, has those wonderful ego capacities which allow us to hang in there to let go. to tolerate pain to encounter suffering, if we didn't encounter suffering, we couldn't grow. So let's close this talk by asking the question what do we let go of? What is the self we let go of? What is the self we forget? As we open to the teachings of the ten thousand things, to being awakened by things as they are, to their miraculousness we let go of self-preoccupation, self-obsession, the loops of self-other schemas that we get sucked into, often driven by trauma that we can find a way out of learning to unhidden From those to let go of those brings us in full contact with a vast, open, spacious landscape.

So in the next talk, I'm going to introduce a couple of models in the interest of liberation from models, but still, models can be fun. So we'll end segment one here.