

Joseph Bobrow Roshi

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

Week Two: "Cultivating *Dhyana, Prajna* and *Sila*"

June 13, 2020



Welcome to the second talk in the four-part series, "The True Person of No Rank: A Zen Story for Our Troubled World." I'm Joseph Bobrow.

Yamada Koun Roshi was one of my teachers. He's renowned for having a very powerful experience of awakening. His story is in the famous book *The Three Pillars of Zen* under "The Japanese Businessman." Throughout his teaching career, he always emphasized the importance of a direct experience of awakening. At the same time, as he got older, he realized that some of the spiritual qualities that sometimes emerged from awakening or sometimes don't, or at least not in a durable, reliable way, were just as important as the awakening.

During his last trip to Maui, at the Maui Zen Temple where I trained in the early '80s, he gave what I thought was a beautiful response to a question that's relevant to our exploration of a true person of no rank. That's to say, no status, no rank, no role, a free person who lives in the world but is not sucked up into it.

He was getting ready to leave and he said, "Now I will say my last words." The last word is a koan. "I will say the last word. Hah!" He laughed. "Earlier, Joe pointed to that picture over there," a picture of Yamada Roshi in robes holding a flower when he first arrived in Maui probably 15 years earlier. So it was a younger version. "Joe pointed to that picture over there and asked if I knew that person. I asked him, 'Do you know him?' And Joe said, 'I do not know him.' And I too said that I didn't know him at all." So this is Zen play, this is Zen dialogue that's going on. "I'm afraid to say," Yamada Roshi continued, "that what I have said this evening has been deceiving. I have deceived all of you." Everyone was just cracking up. "And I must say that I have deceived myself too." He and everyone are laughing. "But you know [pointing to his head], I like him!" Even more laughter. "And we need him. We cannot do without him. This afternoon at Iao Valley Park I was reading a poem of William Merwin's in a book he gave to me. This—is it the words I say or is it the poem of Williams'? I do not know. It is like a dream. That is all, sayonara, it's time to go to bed."

Now, in the Zen world, this is about as fine a teaching as you can have. He said it's all been a dream. Everything that I've talked to you about, enlightenment, awakening spiritual qualities, it's all just a dream. What did he mean? Certainly it doesn't mean that it's not real. But all of those are very nice concepts, 'awakening,' 'spirituality.' I've been roping you into the Zen game to get you interested, but actually, there's nothing to any of it. Nonetheless, you must bring forward, right? He pointed to his head, but he could have pointed to his chest, his heart. You must bring forward this true person of no rank, she's got to emerge! He's got to come forward,

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spontaneously free! Here's another example from the Diamond Sutra of the dream that is the true person of no rank, sort of a lyrical way of putting it.

We should contemplate our conditioned existence like a drop of dew, a bubble in a stream, a flash of lightning, a cloud, a flickering lamp, a phantom, or a dream.

When we're a ghost, clinging to bushes and grasses, clinging to concepts, then we're not bringing forth that dream. Not only are we not awakening, we're not awakening others. We're just tossing around concepts. Each of the schools of Buddhism has a kind of origin story. They all place the Buddha under the Bodhi tree and he awakens after his arduous journey. But in the Zen version, he is reputed to have said, "Oh, now I see that all beings by their very nature are already awakened. It's just their attachments and delusions that keep them from bearing witness to that."

How do we bring our buddhanature to life? This very place is the lotus land, this very body is the Buddha. In Hakuin Zenji's—an old Japanese master—in his *Song of Zazen (Zazen Wasan)*, he says, "Singing and dancing are the voice of the Tao. Laughing and weeping, standing up and sitting down." In the beginning of his *Song of Zazen*, Hakuin writes, "All beings by nature are Buddha, as ice by nature is water. Apart from Buddha, there are no beings. Apart from beings, no Buddha." Right? "We need him." "We need her." The only way Buddha can come to life. If we evacuate all our personal content, if we make ourselves into a shell of ourselves, we kill Buddha! Yeah. "How sad," Hakuin writes, "that people ignore the near and search for truth afar, like a child of a wealthy home wandering among the poor; like someone in the midst of water crying out in thirst."

So now let's get granular and look at a model that's going to be helpful as we move forward, the model of three dimensions of Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism share this model. And it's the triumvirate of *dhyana*, *prajna* and *sila*. *Dhyana*, the Sanskrit word for meditation, the origin of the word Zen. *Dhyana* means absorption, *samadhi*, a kind of meditation that's fully engaged, not observer/observed or subject/object. The second is *prajna*. I just love how these Sanskrit words just sort of roll off your tongue, so I use them, but I'm going to be talking about a number of different English meanings for them and how they connect. *Prajna* means sudden wisdom, thoroughgoing insight that bypasses all the mediation and cognition. The original meaning of it is sudden awakening, or profound insight. The third element of this triumvirate is *sila* in Sanskrit, which originally means precepts. And precepts have their own practice. But I'm using *sila* because it's such a pivotal element of the formulation I'm going to be

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developing. I'm using it as awakened conduct, enlightened activity. By enlightened I mean mutually beneficial, mutually benevolent rather than afflictive activity.

These three elements—*dhyana*, *prajna*, and *sila*—wouldn't be anything without the other. It's through practice on our cushion, through engaged, devoted, immersed practice. So we're not just observing, although observing acutely and discerningly is part of this practice, but we're not just observing, we're engaging. We're forgetting the self as we unite with the task at hand. The task at hand could be breath counting, or peeling tomatoes for the tomato sauce. We're completely engaged through this. I'm suggesting a sequence to this but they mutually influence and mutually interpenetrate. You can't have one without the other but I have to start somewhere as I'm suggesting a sequence. And so did Yamada Roshi and his three elements, which I'll share momentarily.

As we completely let go of self-preoccupation, we become quite peaceful and open. In that state, we're more likely to be awakened by the ten thousand things. In traditional Japanese stories, it could be the sound of a pebble, or the rain starting to drip on my head, or a sneeze. It doesn't take much to generate an experience of realization that I and the universe are not disconnected. That all beings of the universe are by their very nature awakened, and in that awakening, we're all intimately interconnected. Now when we begin to realize this sense of profound sacredness of each object, and how kindred we are with one another, something is shaken in us. There's an ethics to that. You know, the Tibetans say, when you meet someone be mindful because they'd been your mother in a past life. Now, whether they have been my mother in a past life or not, I think this is a teaching that jolts us into awareness that it can't just be business as usual. That we're walking around in a universe of buddhas and bodhisattvas, our sisters and brothers.

Yamada Roshi said that Zen is the perfection of character. Rather than use 'perfection,' I like the word 'refinement,' the endless refinement of character, because perfect can be a strict taskmaster. And he had his own three elements, his three phases for someone who was so nonconceptual. He had a couple of very grandmotherly teaching memes that he shared that have stayed with me. He said that the first stage of Buddhist practice is absorption. And of course, that's *dhyana*. The second is realization and that's *prajna*, and what he called *sila*, the third phase, is personalization. And that's a great gift.

I remember that when I began teaching as a junior teacher, as a sensei, while I was in the midst of working with someone in the room in the dokusan room, I realized that I was parroting my teacher. I was just a conduit for his way of talking and his way of thinking and I realized Holy

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Moly! That's him! It threw me back on myself. So this is a subject of some importance to me. What is my dharma? What is my teaching? What is my voice? And is it okay to find my Zen voice?

Some practitioners, including teachers and real adepts, have overdeveloped muscles you know, like some people have, you know, big biceps and I happen to have big thighs. I have strong legs but my biceps aren't very big, I don't really care about it. But legs are good because you need to walk around and I like to walk around. So, there are those of us who have very strong zazen practice and very little awareness of the way things are. There are other people who through very strong practice, great teachers had a very clear experience of the way things are, a very direct experience and very powerful and moving. And yet somehow something gets lost in the translation into daily living particularly, in the ethical realm. And then there are many people who we see in daily life, we just love them, and they've never practiced in their life. They are just naturally good and all the precepts are already realized in their heart. They're my teachers, frankly. Yeah.

So is it possible to think about the intersection of these three dimensions and whether or not it's possible to bring them together, particularly where practice and prajna get lost or distorted in translation in either a neglect of personalization, neglect of my idiomatic voice, or taking things for granted that I'm so realized that my stuff doesn't smell so I can go be completely free and damage a lot of beings in the world.

So I'm going to leave you with two things. One is the idea of a five tool player from baseball. It's a baseball player who can throw, run, catch, hit for power, and hit for average. If you don't know or care about baseball, just take it on faith. It's sort of a cool expression. And when we look at what's involved in Zen practice, not just the early stages, not just even after realization, but for a whole life because you know, Zen is a life practice, let's be real. I can go on Monday nights and hear a good teacher but Zen is a lifetime practice. Enlightenment is always deepened and distilled and shared. So in order to be a good three tool player, we need to realize that liberation happens on two tracks. The spiritual practice track, the track of the boundless, and it happens on the track of emotional growth. There is a kind of not knowing that can be very harmful when it involves not being aware of the emotional fuels that we are running on and that we are conveying. And that is our subject for the third segment.