

Joseph Bobrow Roshi

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

Week Three: "Purify Your Motivation"

June 20, 2020



In part three, we're going to look at motivation, or intention; the law of cause and effect, or karma; and how the sausage is made—how we take our practice and our realization, such as they are, and how they are transformed through our conduct, speech, and thought in the real world, and what impacts they have. We're going to look at what's involved in distilling our character, or, as Yamada Roshi said, "the perfection of character."

I want to begin with Keizan, who was a follower of Dogen, the great Japanese Zen teacher. Here's a poem he wrote: "Though clear waters range to the vast blue autumn sky / yet how can they compare with the hazy moon on a spring night? Most people want to have pure clarity, / but sweep as you will, you cannot empty the mind."

So many people confuse no self, emptiness, and actual vacuum, actual absence. We don't understand that emptiness, or *sunyata*, the ground of our being, means limitless belonging. It doesn't mean nothing's there. It means that there's a great potential space teeming with possibilities and vast inclusiveness in the context of beginner's mind. And likewise with emptying the mind, getting rid of thoughts. We impoverish ourselves—we cut off our nose to spite our face—because to practice the way is to face suffering, to suffer properly, not to get hung up or hijacked by suffering, but to transform suffering and our relationship to suffering. All of this requires the ability to stand, to withstand, so we can understand.

So what is this true person? I'm using true, just, and congruent in a similar way. That's to say, who is the one? Is that us? Is it our colleagues who can bring *dhyana*, *prajna*, and *silā* together so that they really are informing and infusing one another? That's the Buddhist ideal. I'm going to take that to the bank, I'm just going to make some tweaks to it.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions. This is a truism that we all know. Being able to tune in to the actual impacts that we have is a skill that is not often talked about in Buddhist practice. It requires a suspension of grandiosity. With an experience of awakening sometimes we can feel "Well, I've got it, and I've let go of it. So there! I've got plenty of no self to push around and maybe not so much to learn."

But actually, our impacts have results that we haven't anticipated. There are many wonderful teachers, adepts, who, in translating their realization and practice into daily life have done great harm. They've done great harm because they haven't made allowances for the impacts their conduct has on others.

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We'll come back to motivation, intention, and cause and effect in a moment. But let me just tag for a moment that what's required here, so that things don't get lost in transition, is a path that has two tracks, liberation on two tracks. It's two different kinds of not knowing. One is suspending the certainty that comes from clinging to concepts and knowing, and the other involves not knowing what's happening in the relational sphere, what's happening between me and the many beings; between me and the planet, the more than human creatures; between me and my loved ones; me and my sangha. I posit that we don't have the tools to know that. So I'm going to suggest what we need to be able to know. But the first thing is to realize we're not able to control the impacts we have. They could be divergent from what we think they are. That already is a little bit of humbleness. That's important.

I was sitting with the Dalai Lama in a small group of Buddhist teachers about 10 - 15 years ago at Spirit Rock [Meditation Center]. Almost predictably, the Dalai Lama was asked if he ever gets angry. People think that the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh come from other planets so they're always checking in to see if they have a beating heart and are subject to the same foibles as we all are. So he mildly impatiently said, "Yes." The questioner, actually a very esteemed and experienced teacher, said that he was overwhelmed with some of the scandals around power and money and he didn't know quite what to do. It had shaken him up and shook up the contemporary Buddhist movement. He was asking for some counsel from the Dalai Lama.

The Dalai Lama rocked back and forth for about a minute, and then he said a beautiful interpretation that could have come from a terrific therapist. He said, "You know, when I'm unsure, when I'm confused, I check my motivation. If my motivation is pure, I don't care what anybody thinks about me." I thought that was just fantastic because so many people think he's a devil, or he's a God. He was showing he's not wrapped up in what people think about him. Then he said, "But if I check my motivation and my motivation is afflictive (that's to say it uses emotional fuels that are not benevolent—we can imagine what those are; spite, vengeance, envy, hate, impatience, intolerance, superiority) then I know I have to work on myself."

I thought that was such a wonderful comment, true to the spirit of Buddhism, that it's not just what we do that will determine the benevolent or afflictive results, but it's the intention behind them. I was very curious about this, I was so in awe of the statement, but I had to follow up. So I followed up several times at this event, at other events, privately with his translator, with another translator. I was asking, "Is it possible that even when we check our motivation that there are elements of our motivation which we're unaware of? Is it possible that we're running on certain emotional or spiritual fuels that we're unaware of, and that's why it has the effects it has?"

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So I'm proposing for all of us to get on board and become three tool players, using our practice. First, *dhyana*, the practice of deepening, discerning awareness. Second, *prajna*, the sudden and gradual awakenings we have, and the understandings that we integrate into our daily living and our embodiment. Third, our *sila*, the degree to which our conduct is awakened conduct, awakening, and compassionate toward ourselves and toward all the many beings we are so intimately connected with. Whether we can become three tool players, rather than just having big biceps and just *dhyana*, or great, I don't know, great cheekbones, *prajna*, or just being good people, although if I had my choice, I'd just be a good person.

So how can we get those working together? I'm suggesting one of the things that grease the wheels for this is becoming aware that liberation happens on two tracks, and becoming able to trace the tracks of the impacts of our conduct and to realize that there's another realm of teaching and practice that we left to one side. Those of us who go into therapy, we have that other modality. But I want to describe how this works in some detail now. I remember being at a koan review seminar with some of my buddies in Hawaii many years ago. There was one amongst us who had a particularly keen dharma eye. In response to one of the koans he gave the response, "I don't know." That was the right response. And I and others felt that he was lording this on top of us. Now, why did we have that feeling? He was not aware of that. He was just in the midst of this free exchange and he was sharing his understanding of this koan with us, but I had the distinct feeling of someone saying that they knew and we didn't know. Now, this happens in daily life. This is a very innocent example of it.

A much less innocent example of it would be to reiterate an example I gave earlier, the United States' invasion of Iraq. It was for all the right reasons, to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and to install a better government for the Iraqi people. But the way it turned out was quite different. The way it turned out revealed other elements of the motivation, motivation: pure greed, and power. That very toxic motivation and energy, what I like to call a toxic fuel, that's what determines the outcome. So it's in accord with the Buddhist teaching, but it allows for the fact that there are elements of our impacts we need other tools to become aware of and to be able to refine, to do the work of perfecting our character. There are two elements to that. One is we need a community. We can do it ourselves because we have a blind spot. The blind spot is built in! It's not just a function of not good enough practice, or deep enough insight, or being a bad person. So we're bringing it forward in a toxic kind of way. It's built-in. For every light, there is a shadow. That's just the way it works. So we need to develop the ability to tune into what I call "the unconscious emotional field," or what the famous therapist Adam Phillips called "the black market of emotions."

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For example, I'm talking to you and you're talking to me, but there's something else going on that we don't realize until two weeks down the road. Is it possible for us to realize that there is this black market of emotions, of emotional communication or unconscious emotional communication, that we're unaware of so that we're unconscious of it, and that it's unconscious in the relational field itself? So you see—and I hate to keep using examples from tragedies in sanghas—but you see sanghas going along for decades with a pathological teacher. The pathological teacher is pretending to be good and everybody's doing this dance. And then they finally realize what's going on, they wake up to the unconscious reality of what's been going on, and all the pain they've been going through.

So there are two elements: one is the unconscious element, and we cultivate the ability to become aware not only of emotions. Buddhists have become pretty good at developing the ability to become aware of emotions, right? Because that's accessible consciously. I can do a body scan, I can feel the contractions, I can do 14 things until Sunday.

But I am often hit upside the head by the fact that somebody found me insulting. Insulting? Me, Moi? First of all, I wasn't aware of it, and second, it doesn't enter my self-concept, you see. I'm suggesting that practice has to be cued by the community, by other people. The best person to ask for a reference about somebody is their dog because their dog knows really how they are. Or you can ask their husband or wife or partner, but if you ask them, you have to take it with a grain of salt. Because no matter how awakened we are, we do have a kind of identity, like it or not. We can try to crush it, we can try to punish it, we can try to pretend we've emptied it, but we do have a kind of identity and along with that, this Zen man, psychoanalyst, writer, community guy, Joe Bobrow, has some blind spots. So I need you to help me awaken so that I can better purify my motivation and plant benevolent seeds which will ripen in benevolent ways. This is liberation on two tracks and becoming a five [sic: three] tool player, and we'll stop this segment here.