

Joseph Bobrow Roshi

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

Week Four: "Archetypes of the Awakened Person"

June 27, 2020



Welcome back everybody to the final and concluding part of "The True Person of No Rank: A Zen Story for Our Troubled World." In this segment, I'm going to look at some of the common myths, and I mean myths as archetypes for awakening and awakened living. I'll have a look at them and suggest some updates that I think are helpful and that may be contained in the original Buddhist teachings, but don't come across that way. I'd also like to talk about the Zen students' responsibility, both their ability to respond, what's involved in that, and their responsibility, a sense of responsibility for our world and our conduct, and actually for everyone's conduct.

A few years ago I was invited to China to teach Zen. I thought that was hilarious. It was like bringing coals to Newcastle. And yet, the Chinese have forgotten their Zen roots to some degree. There's a revival of Zen happening in China; some of it is genuine and some of it is business-oriented, like, "How much merit can I buy?" There's a lot of stuff that maybe is not as wholesome as it could be. But the Chinese people who came to my workshops connected. I was thrilled. And what they connected with was [the bodhisattva] Guanyin. Everybody knows Guanyin! Guanyin is the archetype of compassion. Guanyin is Kannon [in Japanese], in Korean, we chant her name as Gwan-eum. She is the living embodiment of compassionate conduct in action. Remember that there's an immediacy to Zen realization. I don't know how you work, but there's gradual, gradual, I can see things from this angle, that angle, another angle, and then one day, something just as clear as day and I understand the whole thing. That's at least just how I work. It is kind of sudden.

You know, there's this tussle between the gradual school of enlightenment and the sudden school of enlightenment in Zen. I think it's both rather than either/or. But there definitely is a sudden element to it, and along with that sudden element comes a spontaneity in Zen expression. Because Zen is a transmission beyond name and form, it cannot be grasped by names, words, conceptual formulations, and yet it's expressed in what we say, do, and think. It's kind of a paradox. So in that spontaneity, I like to say that Guanyin exercises a kind of tutored spontaneity. That's to say, if I am walking by a homeless person, I take in that situation, right, I become one with that situation. I meditate on that situation and become immersed. I realize and bear witness to what's happening and I take some action, I respond.

I find that most people who have not practiced Zen for a while don't understand that responsiveness is the *sine qua non* of Zen practice. It's not just cultivating *samadhi*, peace, focus, awareness. It's not just developing insight, but it's responding in accord with the situation, what in the military is called "conditions on the ground." It's about being at one with those conditions and allowing a spontaneous response to emerge.

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So what's to keep a spontaneous response from being a wild response? Well, nothing. That's why the other person is so important. That's why the sangha is so important. That's why the many beings and the greater than human creatures are so important if we only listen to their feedback, which we don't most of the time. So is there a way that through this practice that I was talking about in our last segment, tracking the traces of the impacts of our conduct in relational spheres, large and small, and working with that kind of not knowing that comes up. That despite all of my Zen practice, I need to stay in touch with this to make sure the conduct has been benevolent, and if it hasn't I need to—as the Dalai Lama says—check my motivation and do a course correction and learn from experience. Learning from experience is the gold standard here.

Nyogen Senzaki was a great teacher of my teacher. He was a very humble roshi who came to this country back in the '40s, worked as a washing machine repairman, and had a little sangha in his apartment, but he touched many lives. On the wall of the Maui Zen Temple was a calligraphy piece by him, his last words. It starts with "Bodhisattvas," because he loved to call everybody a bodhisattva. You know the koan where the teacher says, "Little bodhisattvas, come get your rice!" It's a wonderful koan. "Come get your rice," or come get the essential teachings, come wake up to the hearty meal you're being served right there. Nyogen Senzaki used to be a kindergarten teacher, and that's another reason why I liked him because I was a preschool director. So up on the wall it says, "Bodhisattvas, trust your own head. Do not put on any false heads above your own. Then minute by minute, moment by moment, watch your steps carefully. These are my last words to you."

I think Senzaki is talking about an added dimension of practice. "Watch your steps carefully." In a way, it sounds sort of subject/object, goal-oriented, like you're outside watching your steps. It doesn't sound very Zen-like. And "trust your head" can be misinterpreted as "anything goes," right? If you have dharma transmission, you have a lot of students and they're fawning all over you, then your stuff doesn't smell, you can do whatever you want! Until the stuff hits the fan and you have to pick up the pieces. So I think this is exactly what Senzaki is talking about. Trust your own head.

Don't be a ghost, clinging to bushes and grasses, clinging to concepts. "I'm a great student." "I really am a terrible student, I have to work hard." That's a ghost clinging to bushes and grasses. Let go of all of that. Find your true home, wake up to your true self. Take that backward stuff we talked about. You'll find that all beings are there awakening with you in beginningless time. "Trust your own head. Do not put on any false heads above your own." So important! I like to say that this is self-inflation and the kind of self-inflation that comes not only from attainment



but the self-inflation that comes from pure narcissism. We're getting a crash course in these last three years and now we're having to bring out the crash cart to serve the people who've gotten the crash course, who are suffering from the grievous effects of a self gone mad. This is self-obsession, self-possession, self-aggrandizement. This truly is delusion and suffering.

This is very different than if I build a bed for my new family and feel so proud that my son and partner can lie in this bed. I remember building a bed like that. It just felt so good. But some people think that that feeling must be narcissistic, that it must be wrapped up in the self, rather than being a human being with real feelings. So trust your own head. Do not put on any false heads above your own because you don't need any. And moment by moment, watch your own steps carefully, and I would add, be aware that other people are watching your own steps carefully too. You don't have to be paranoid, I don't mean it like that, but they're feeling the impacts of your choices, just like when you walk in a forest, the birds two miles away hear your footsteps. How you walk and how you interact in an interconnected system has profound effects. What happens over here happens over there, and what's happening over there is already or will soon impact what's happening here. That, my viewers, is the law of cause and effect.

So to wake up to that intimately interconnected web of cause and effect, we need to be open to the fact that we don't know it all, and Zen is not a way to know it all. It's a way to be alive and to live benevolently with joy and energy in a world of suffering. It is not a way to have the final word. Even Yamada Roshi didn't have the final word! Remember, I read the story? He kept saying "the last word, the final word, that's a koan," and he just kept laughing. He was saying, 'If any of you have gotten the impression from what I said that anything I said was fixed in a canon and the final word you've completely missed my intent.'

So we are co-responsible because our fates co-arise. Now we're getting a chance to see the truth of the Zen saying that "When I awaken, I awaken with bushes and grasses and rocks and clouds, we all awaken together." Now we see that for sure. We see that our conduct affects one another so intimately and almost instantly, like John Lennon said, almost like instant karma.

I want to close with the word resistance because I think we are resisting. The Buddha gave a teaching apparently in which he talks about going against the grain. Now more than ever, we go against the grain by not allowing our conduct to be fueled by greed, hatred, ignorance, and delusion. It's not to say they don't arise endlessly. It's not to say we don't know them or they don't arise in us. But we understand very deeply how toxic they are. We don't cultivate them. We don't water them. We don't welcome them in as roommates. They're just passing through. So in this



world of ours, it takes a tremendous amount of courage, perseverance, and fortitude to practice zazen and to have enough bandwidth and freedom to sit and follow our breath, or work on our koan, or practice lovingkindness. That is itself an act of resistance in a world gone mad. So we don't have to judge ourselves by any external standard. I know so many people nowadays are thinking, "Well, what can I do? What can I do?" And of course, to some degree, I feel the same way. I want to be useful. I think if we want one thing in this world, it's to be of use. But I want to remind us that the world is vast and wide and the web of interconnection, that connective tissue that links all of us, not just the trees in the forest, but all human hearts is vast and wide and when we do sincere practice, all beings grow.

Let me close by speaking about the bodhisattva, who, in a way, is another word for the true person of no rank. Classically, the bodhisattva is one who is intrinsically enlightened but puts aside their final enlightenment until all beings find enlightenment. I always thought somehow that doesn't ring true. It doesn't seem like that's the way it happens. There's something almost codependent or enabling in that definition of a bodhisattva. So without throwing out the baby with the bathwater, I asked myself isn't the bodhisattva somebody who understands that when I blossom, the whole world blossoms? The bodhisattva understands that when you blossom, I not only feel glad for you (I do that too, joy in the joy of others, is one of the four noble abodes of the Buddha), not just that I'm happy for you, but I'm happy because we are so interconnected. I feel your happiness, I share your happiness, and we nourish each other in this way. We co-arise. It's not that we are. It's that in that wonderful phrase of my old friend and teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, we *inter-are*. It cannot be other than that.

This is important because many of us know when the world is on fire, when others are suffering, we feel suffering. But it also means that it's okay to feel joy, and there is tremendous joy in solidarity. We've seen it over the last five years. I just saw it on one of these videos where people play the same song in different parts of the world. I just started weeping because I knew that this was the Buddha's dream.

All of us are different, and no one of us, no instrument, is more important or less important. Each part is essential for the whole and each part has to come forward with its best and most unique idiomatic expression of their buddhanature, for the benefit of the whole for the whole to exist. So this conflict between self-realization and collective good evaporates and that is Buddha's dream. That is why it's so important to cultivate joy and to trust our own head.

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I'll close with just a couple of sentences from my old teacher, Robert Aitken, from his wonderful book *The Mind of Clover*, a great classic. How do we actualize the oneness of all beings through responsibility, the ability to respond like that of the clover? When the clover is cut, its roots die and release their nitrogen and the soil is enriched. Earthworms flourish in the rich soil and deposit more nutrients, new seeds fall, take root, mature, and feed other organisms. Clover does not think about responsibility. And neither did Shakyamuni Buddha. He simply arose from his seat under the Bodhi tree and he went looking for his friends. The clover simply puts down its roots and puts up its leaves and flowers. Fundamentally, the no thought of the clover and the no thought of Shakyamuni are the same.

But the problem is—I'll paraphrase this part. The clover doesn't have to think about it. It just knows the interconnections and its gift is its nitrogen. If we Human beings practice and practice we also don't think about responsibility. It's not some sort of moralistic burden we carry. That's not the Buddha's dream, right? The Buddha's dream is Guanyin coming forward with one of her thousand hands and arms just suited for that situation. But we have a choice. Human beings can choose to water other seeds and to refuse or to disavow that ability to come forward, and so we can cause great harm. That's the difference. So let's be like the clover.