

Enter a Person of No Rank

The many beings are numberless; I vow to save them.

Greed, hatred, and ignorance rise endlessly; I vow to abandon them.

Dharma gates are countless; I vow to wake to them.

Buddha's way is unsurpassed; I vow to embody it fully.¹

The world is burning. People are destroying it. Some are stoking the combustion by fanning the flames of hate or violence, amplifying and manipulating our deepest anxieties, preying on a set of deadly multidimensional crises, exploiting public shock and anguish for private gain. The most toxic and corrosive psychic fuels are intensified and spread like wildfires with purposely false information.

In classical Buddhism, samsara, the world of sorrow and pain, is sometimes associated with heat and fire. The heat of the blind passions. But today we are living in a massive emergent samsara where we are witnessing and participating in the destruction of our planet and its creatures and the degradation of the finest human qualities. It seems out of control, and at times, it is out of control. We suffer from helplessness, despair, terror, and numbness as we face the risk, perhaps the increasing likelihood, that the human species and thousands of others with it will not survive.

In the "Four Infinite Vows" cited above, Zen practitioners chant "Greed, hatred, and delusion rise endlessly." These are referred to as the Three Poisons. Although I've chanted them for fifty years, today I see more clearly than ever just how toxic the Three Poisons are, unbridled and sometimes masquerading as benevolence, reasonableness, or normality. The richest few have their fortunes balloon as the many struggle to survive. Hatred becomes

normalized, with those in power “saying the quiet things out loud.” The psychotic denial of objective reality, along with the cynical and deadly mind manipulation and gaslighting of tens of millions of us, is frighteningly real, if delusional. In the first line of the Four Infinite Vows, we chant, “Innumerable beings, I vow to save.” Saving all beings is at the heart of Mahayana Buddhism. The boat is big, all can come on board as we row to the other shore.

In Mahayana Buddhism (great vehicle), the archetype is the bodhisattva, in Theravada Buddhism (school of the elders), the arhant. Mahayanists used to refer to Theravadins as the Hinayana (lesser vehicle) school. “Lesser” because they focused on their own liberation. “Greater” because it’s a big tent, a big project, working toward the liberation of all beings. What hubris! As we know, all vehicles shall be towed. I wonder if mensch would be a possibility. In this book, I propose a “true person of no rank,” an agent of compassion.

I remember saying to my teacher Aitken Roshi early in my practice, “Saving—that has a messianic ring, almost like rescuing beings from original sin; saving their souls.” He responded, “Then think ‘protect.’” I could relate to that and let go of the messianic associations to the word ‘save.’ But today, ‘save’ is neither hyperbolic, messianic, nor moralistic. It’s up to all of us to turn the ship around to save our planet, our fellow humans, and the more than human world. We must shepherd our finest qualities and share them vigorously. Aitken Roshi would sometimes say we are all practicing Buddha’s dream, cultivating compassion and wisdom for the benefit of all beings. Now more than ever we need to cultivate and bring to bear all our capacities, counteract numbing and despair, and, individually and collectively, unleash wise and responsive action to save the world.

It is to encourage such action that I take a fresh look at Buddha’s vision for an awakened person and her awakened activity. I examine the true self (also referred to as no-self) that is at the heart of such activity, and endeavor to untangle some misunderstandings that can hinder us on the path and impede the distinctive, empowered expression of our realization. I explore the notion of a true person of no rank—a Zen expression of no-self—as well as of an

agent of compassion.

There is a person of no rank who is constantly coming and going from the portals of your face. Who is the true person of no rank?

Ninth-century Chinese Zen master Linji raised the ‘poor’ person of no-rank and saddled him with the unenviable label ‘true’ to boot. Why dredge up an old concept from the scrap heap? Because we need this person now more than ever. In these dark and crazy times, when truth and reality are themselves up for sale, maleficence masquerades as helping, and unbridled greed, hatred, and delusion are rampant and commonplace, it’s a radical act to draw a breath freely and exhale long and slow. It’s revolutionary to stand up, sit down, laugh, and weep. Buddhist living is not exceptional; it expresses our full humanity. Being human is wondrous and shockingly ordinary. It hurts and delights; it’s real. Real quickens, nourishes, and transforms. Poor person of no rank, unholy, unfinished.

Linji invites us to live freely without cleaving to title or rank or any identification at all. Without dualistic constriction: enlightened or deluded; Buddha or ordinary person; success or failure; mind or heart; self-interest or collective interest. He also subverts fixed role-based identities. But don’t think he means anything goes.

True no-self, the root of no-rank and no-title, is the most easily misunderstood Buddhist teaching. We formulate it (“no-self, nothingness, emptiness”) and then react to it—our own formulation—with confusion, dread, and desire. Some want nothing more than to eliminate all trace of self, thoughts, feelings, and distinctiveness. To be nobody. Maybe then there will be less pain, more gain. Replace an ordinary persona with a Buddhist persona, and then walk around acting the part. Nothing is not something called nothing. But far from being literally void of stuff, our true no-self nature is dynamic, emergent, full of possibility, teeming with potential and unformed qualities.

Poor person of no rank, unholy, unfinished and done with becoming. Full of holes, he lets in

sounds of the world and hears voices sorrowful and aching to blossom, belong and contribute. And he responds. As he transforms his own suffering, he naturally recognizes and responds to other beings. We need him. His peace, his pieces richly composting, responsive to humans and other beings near and far. Body and mind unencumbered, heart and soul untethered, available.

Not striving for perfection or pushing away evil, her activity is naturally in alignment with shifting conditions. Unsanctimonious and benevolent, she learns from children, animals, and seniors, the annoying prophetic voice, and the subtle impacts of her own conduct. She walks the ancient Way, living Buddha's dream.

In *Zen and Psychotherapy: Partners in Liberation*, I described how spiritual practice (represented by Zen) and emotional growth (represented by psychoanalysis) were "partners in liberation." In *A True Person of No Rank*, I build on this conversation and introduce a third interlocutor, social action, to form an emancipatory trio. These three have been interweaving in my life from early on. We can't really bring these dimensions—we can call them psyche, spirit, and world—together; they are together. Intertwining, they forge an integrative myth, an ancient dream updated, in which the individual and the collective arise and work in tandem. It's a story in which meditation, insight, and benevolent action operate in concert.

It takes an insubstantial person of substance, (not fixed or permanent but grounded) not only to survive these dire times, but to actively participate in saving the planet and healing the world. It takes a differentiated person, an agent of compassion, to bring to bear the insights of oneness and radical interconnection at the heart of Buddha's dream.

Person, agent—each is in accord with true no-self. How can that be? Don't we "let it all go? Forever." Once and forever? True self or no-self is not selflessness. It is not even something called "no-self." It is not on the register of self and non-self, selfish and selfless; therefore we

call it 'true' or 'no-self' or 'the person of no-rank.' It is dynamic, full of idiomatic human qualities and capacities we must not waste by misrecognizing and discarding them.

The British psychoanalyst and writer Christopher Bollas says that we each have our own distinctive idiom, a personal and aesthetic signature that pre-dates the environmental influences in our upbringing and needs interactive elaboration and dissemination. We seek external objects and interactions that will release this personal idiom. A simple example might be how one child is drawn early on to sounds, then to musical instruments and conducting, while another cannot get enough of throwing balls, then street games, and goes on to play professional sports. We must not waste these capacities by misrecognizing them as kleshas (afflictions) and discarding them.

Open and at rest like Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of compassion, it is responsive to the sounds of the world, the sounds of anguish. Like Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of wisdom, it comes forth wisely, personalized and in accord with circumstances. Our world needs the vigor and diversity of our true selves—true persons of no-rank and agents of compassion—more than ever, just as the Jeweled Net of Indra—the ancient Buddhist image of intimacy and particularity—needs each jeweled point Indra's limitless net to shine forth distinctively for the benefit of all.

Let's say (play) that true self or no-self is actually whole self: radically inclusive, unfettered, unhindered, and unimpeded in its responsiveness. Unsequestered, undivided, not isolated, fragmented, or permanent. It includes the bombs, the fires, the poison, the greed, hatred, and ignorance; the joy, the pain—all we can see and all we can't see, all of it. Everything 'outside' and 'inside,' conscious and unconscious. All belong. All are limitless belonging.

Realizing and living this truth both requires and helps build an underlying sense of self, a sense of agency, a sense of personhood, a sense of worth and freedom and empowerment. These are the foundational elements. When they're not present, or when they're

compromised or inaccessible, they obtrude and we suffer; when they are well established and operating, we don't suffer [so much]. "True self," "no-self," and "whole self" are absent, invisible, making no claims.

Old master Yuan-Yu said, "When bodhisattvas who live a householder's life cultivate practices of home-leavers, it is like a lotus blooming in fire. It will always be hard to tame the will for fame and rank and power and position, not to mention all the starting points of vexation and turmoil associated with the burning house of worldly existence. The only way is for you to realize your fundamental, real, wondrous wholeness and reach the stage of great calm, stability, and rest." And more, to not to stop there.