

Barry Magid  
Week 1, *Taking the Self Whole*  
“Taking the Self Whole”  
September 30<sup>st</sup>, 2013  
[www.tricycle.com/retreats](http://www.tricycle.com/retreats)

Hello, I’m Barry Magid and this will be the first of a series of four talks for Tricycle’s online retreat. The overall theme of these talks will be taking life whole. In the first one I’m going to talk about why we practice. In the second I’ll say something about how we practice, what practice is and isn’t. In the third and fourth talks I’m going to discuss a couple of old koans—dialogues between teachers and masters—to illustrate a little bit of the perspective that could open up to us in practice.

Now when we want to take life whole, we have to start by taking ourselves whole. That really turns out to be the hard part. As the old Japanese master Dogan said, “To study way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self.” I think that saying is popular because a lot of people want to run ahead to the forget the self part. They’re all too happy to forget the self and they’re not so interested in actually studying the self. They come up face to face with all the parts of themselves that make them uncomfortable and cause their suffering.

One way or another we all come to practice to relieve suffering; Buddha said there’s a cause of suffering and a way, a path out of suffering. It’s natural that one of our intentions in practice is to relieve suffering. But, we immediately get entangled in how we understand the causes of suffering and what it means to work with them. There are various translations of what Buddha said was the cause of suffering. Sometimes you hear it translated as, “the cause of suffering is desire,” sometimes as “attachment,” sometimes as “delusion.” While it might be interesting to find out what in the original texts Buddha really meant by that word, as a teacher I’m actually more interested in what each person imagines the cause of suffering is for themselves.

Everybody has their own personal—rather idiosyncratic—notion of what’s the cause of their suffering and what they come to practice to try to deal with. That means that we all begin practice with some picture of what about ourselves is the problem, what we want to get rid of, what we want to change, what we think the problem is that we’re here to fix.

Barry Magid  
Week 1, *Taking the Self Whole*  
“Taking the Self Whole”  
September 30<sup>st</sup>, 2013  
[www.tricycle.com/retreats](http://www.tricycle.com/retreats)

Sometimes personally we'll think “my anxiety is the problem,” or “my anger is the problem,” or “my greed or sexuality is the problem.” Whenever we identify some aspect of ourselves by thinking “that is the problem,” we create a corresponding idealized image of how we're supposed to look or feel without that intrusive element.

It's certainly true that practice is supposed to do something about all that anxiety, or greed, or selfishness, but the difficulty is it can't do anything about it directly. All of those transformations have to happen indirectly as a byproduct of our practice. If we come in with the idea of “I want to get rid of my anger,” basically what ends up happening is we hate our anger. If we want to get rid of our anxiety we make ourselves anxious, and we can't get rid of it. Somebody once said anxiety is the feeling of trying to control the uncontrollable.

If there's anything we find out about our minds, what we see is they're uncontrollable. They are almost controllable. We can get into a complicated practice of self control—trying to get into one state or another, trying to create some image of how we think we're suppose to look, or feel, or be, and we push everything aside to try to get that in shape. The dilemma is that in the name of practice, we are always setting up one part of ourselves in war with another. We give our self-hate the name *aspiration*.

You hear a lot about dualism in Buddhism. Often it's presented as some kind of abstraction of self and other; self and the world and we need to break down these false dichotomies. The real dualism that makes a difference in people's lives is the way they're divided internally against themselves, often in the name of practice. One side takes up arms against the other and calls it practice.

That internal division is inevitable. Everybody comes into practice doing that. We want to wise-up a little bit to that process, and not collude with it. We want to illuminate it. We want to see that that's inevitably what we're doing. We want to see what kind of

Barry Magid  
Week 1, *Taking the Self Whole*  
“Taking the Self Whole”  
September 30<sup>st</sup>, 2013  
[www.tricycle.com/retreats](http://www.tricycle.com/retreats)

alternative there is to the kind of practice that tries to extricate the parts of ourselves we don't like. We can't cut out our anger, vulnerability, anxiety or dependency. All these things are in the picture to stay and we've got to figure out what we're going to do with them.

This practice is coming to terms with that curative fantasy—that secret practice. We try to shape our experience in practice in accord with that curative fantasy. That curative fantasy basically means we have some idea of what's wrong with us, what's going to fix it, and what the end product is supposed to look like. We think that practice is actualizing that. *Real* practice is going to mean deconstructing that whole business and seeing what else the practice could be.

I will give you a case example of a curative fantasy and how it evolves in practice. We could draw one from the autobiography of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Zen master Hakuin, who's literature talked about his own childhood, reasons for practicing, and how his practice evolved over the course of his life. He called his autobiography *Wild Ivy*. When he was about eleven years old, a visiting Buddhist preacher came to his small town and preached a literally fire and brimstone talk about how if you didn't embrace the faith of Buddhism you would go to one of the hate scorching hells. He just scared the bejesus out of little Hakuin. Hakuin was sure that he was damned and was going to go to hell and that he needed somehow to figure out how to escape that. He doesn't quite say why he was so sure he was going to be damned, but he was an adolescent boy; we can make a few guesses. In any case, his mother told him, “All you can do is go to the temple and pray.” Hakuin just couldn't relieve his anxiety. Not only was he anxious, but also he developed phobias. He wouldn't take hot baths because the flames and the hot water reminded him of hell. He was really a pretty neurotic kid. He got ordained at the age of fourteen, which I guess was not uncommon in those days. He threw himself at the practice explicitly with this idea of “I've got to overcome all my fears.” So much of what that meant for him was putting himself through an intense austere practice that would somehow was going to be

Barry Magid  
Week 1, *Taking the Self Whole*  
“Taking the Self Whole”  
September 30<sup>st</sup>, 2013  
[www.tricycle.com/retreats](http://www.tricycle.com/retreats)

designed to make him invulnerable. He tortured himself in the process of trying to escape these fantasies of being tortured in the next life. So much of what he put himself through was driven from this kind of fear. As a good monk, he got tough and was able to do all these rigorous practices. One day he heard a talk about one of the great Chinese masters Ganto, who was murdered by bandits. When he was killed he let out this great shout. Hakuin just fell apart. He said, “If a great master like Ganto can get murdered and die screaming, what hope do I have?”

So this is a picture of somebody whose curative fantasy is very explicitly of invulnerability. I think we all come to practice with some version of that invulnerability fantasy. When I started Zen practice back in the 70s, it was much more explicitly a macho, tough guy kind of practice. There was a whole epic of “I can put up with anything.” In some sense there was sort of an idea that if you can sit absolutely still in intense physical pain, you can put up with anything. Maybe that’s what goes to translate being able to put up with emotional pain. It doesn’t. But that was the idea.

Hakuin, after many years of all this practice, did in fact have this wonderful enlightenment experience that he was looking for. All of the sudden he felt all of his troubles were gone and he shouted, “Oh Ganto is alive and well.” He thought, “Great this is it” and he finally got it. Then he says, “Well what happened next?” Basically he said, “I became a really arrogant asshole. I thought I had it. Everybody else was a fool and I went around in this puffed up state because now I was enlightened.”

What you see is almost inevitably the first step in people’s practice like this. They go from “Oh my God I don’t have it” to “Wow, I’ve got it.” They don’t get rid of the dichotomy, the basic dualism of “have it” and “don’t have it.” They just switch sides. For a lot of people that’s all they want out of practice. They just want to switch sides. They want to be on the winning team. Forget about getting rid of winning or losing. I just want to get on the winning side.

Barry Magid  
Week 1, *Taking the Self Whole*  
“Taking the Self Whole”  
September 30<sup>st</sup>, 2013  
[www.tricycle.com/retreats](http://www.tricycle.com/retreats)

Hakuin is lucky in a way that he encountered a teacher who just slapped him silly and didn't take his enlightenment experience as the be-all-end-all. He really drove home the idea that practice is not about getting yourself into some special condition. If you think about forgetting the self, it means not being totally preoccupied with what condition your condition is in, not being totally focused all the time on “do I have it” or “don't I have it?”

Hakuin went through many, many great satories and many equally great relapses into foolishness, arrogance, and depression. It's an honest account of his life in practice with real ups and downs. Eventually he came around to the perspective that real understanding is expressed in going out in teaching, helping people, and serving. It's not about finally having the inner state that *you* have always longed for. When he was an old man and had students of his own, he once asked a student who was becoming his Dharma successor named Torei Enji, “Why did you come to practice?” Torei said, “To save all beings.” Hakuin said, “That's a lot better reason than I had.” If a student came to me now and said, “I'm practicing to save all beings,” I'd say, “Yeah right.”

To conclude this first talk, I would ask each of you the question: Why are you practicing? Then I'd ask you, why are you *really* practicing?