

Zenju Earthlyn Manuel  
Week 1, *It's Beyond Me: Freedom from Managing Your Life*  
March 2, 2015  
"Allowing Life to Happen"  
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So, greetings. My name is Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, and I'd like to welcome you to this four-part series, Retreat Online, here at Tricycle, and our topic is "Freedom from Managing Our Reality" or managing our lives, I like to say. So, again, it's "Freedom from Managing Our Lives" or our reality. So we will be joined together in an experience, and I'd like you to just listen and become part of the teaching rather than trying to grab onto the teaching. See what becomes a part of you, what becomes an experience; as opposed to what becomes knowledge. So I'll ask us to be on this journey. So it's four parts, and this is part one.

So we're going to begin with a little bit of silence. Just take some time right now to just settle and breathe, so that we can come into more of our body, as opposed to our minds. So just take a little time to breathe here. And to let go of anticipation, to let go of what we're about to do, and just be right in this moment, right here in this body. Just notice how the body is breathing on its own. There's nothing for you to do; nothing for you to manage at this time.

So if you'll listen to the sound of the bell as we end our silence, all right. So I'd like to begin with a poem called "In the Wild" that I wrote some time ago, since we're talking about life. This poem is about life.

The path is life, and the purpose of life is to live it: to be soothed by its waters, still flowing, and warmed by the sun that reaches those who stand boldly in the open. Live this moment, and life stretches into eternity, revealing the stars flung in the vastness of your night. Hold open what it means to be alive and still breathing, despite all that has burned away in your living through fire.

Dare you sweep up the ashes, whittle and sand the charred pieces, and make a smooth mound of yourself—a mound that, if breathed upon, will float you back to the silence of your beginnings? Your arrival is now, landing on a new shore, a lifeline cast beyond anything imposed by the shadows of what appeared as mountains, beyond the distorted reflections in puddles that seemed to be watering holes, and past the fuel of desire mistaken for the sun. Might your fear be the onset of freedom from your beliefs, causing tremors, or the fear that you are still breathing after having spent your generous years at wishing wells?

Might your fear be that breathing in and breathing out is too simple of a contribution to the great, unsurpassed journey of life? No need to gather your breath and store it in your belly. Your breath is to be heard in the wild nature of all things. Like a bird's song, like the call of bison, your breath is to be discharged into the world, ascended up from the earth of ancestors, out into the atmosphere of a million realms. This is life.

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So that's a lot of words, right? A lot of words. But in the end, you probably remember the words: “This is life.” And so the breathing that we're doing, and that we did, and that you might do in your meditation practice, is just relating to that life that we have, that we've been giving; the unsurpassed life. And so what does it mean, “the unsurpassed life”? It means that we have been given an incredible gift, something greater than we can imagine, and we called it life. But here we are, breathing, and we're alive. But yet, we go off and try to manage this life. We try to make it the way we want it to be, perhaps the way we wanted our parents, wanted us to be, rather. Perhaps the way our parents wanted us to be, and—or the way a teacher might have wanted us to become.

Some of our fantasies and our dreams kind of drive us toward a life that takes us away from the unsurpassed nature of it, from the freedom of it. So the title of our series is “Freedom from Managing our Reality and our Lives.” And I wanted to talk about that word *freedom* because it has many meanings, and I wanted to put it in a context in which we can use throughout this four-part series.

So, when I say *freedom* I am talking about the way or the process of life—living this way, or process of life—in which there is an unfolding; matter of fact, just really the part of life in which we have nothing to do, like our breathing—nothing to do with it, other than just be in it. And so *freedom* in this context is the integral or internal acceptance of an unfolding life. So sometimes that's fearful to people to hear, that, “Oh, my life is just unfolding, and I have nothing to do with it. This doesn't sound good. I need to be able to take care of things so that I'm not hurt, to take care of things so that I am well, I can eat, I'm housed, I'm taken care of.” So we're really managing this life so that we are not headed toward any injury, or headed toward any unexpected death. And so that's where management comes in. There's a fear of not being recognized, the fear of not being prominent, acknowledge, praised, regarded—all of these things come up when we're beginning to manage our lives. And as these things come up, we move away from this natural unfolding of life, like a river.

There's a river that—you've seen rivers meander about. That is our life. It's unfolding. It's coming down like water over the rocks, over the twigs, over the leaves. And when we begin to manage our lives, what happens is we might decide, “Well, let me move that stone over here, because it's in the way of the way the water's sounding. So I'm going to move this stone over here.” Or, “I'm going to dig a hole so the water goes down deeper, and I can hear more of a splash.” So you start to control that water. And that's what managing our life is like. We begin to dig down in our own rivers, and begin to move these stones around, and dig holes, or bring in

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things to help the water move the way *we* want the water to move. And suddenly, this river I'm relating to as “the unsurpassed life” becomes a—sometimes they call it a human-made water source. And so that's what we become: a human-made water source. Our river becomes manufactured. It's somewhat like a dam, which we—the water's there, but it's being directed the way we want to direct the water.

And so I'm hoping, in this series, that we begin to relieve ourselves of managing this unsurpassed life, relieve ourselves from managing this river, this unfolding, this natural unfolding of breathing, our hearts beating, our lives meeting each other. And I want to create a space, and together we can create this space of freedom, right here and right now.

So I have a question. In each session, we'll have a question, and this question for part one is: “How can we secure or manage a life that is groundless by nature?” How can we secure or manage a life that is groundless by nature? So that—it's a scary thought. “Oh, are you saying that we can't secure our life? We can't bring stability? How can I live this life without bringing stability? That's what I was taught as a child: Go to school, get educated, get your degree, get a job, and you'll be stable.” And so we all know, and we've probably done that. Many of you out there have done that. You have headed toward many objects of your life—this dream, that job, that vision, that way of life—and maybe reaching for nothing sometimes, feeling despair and hopelessness. So we know that that path can lead us to still not feel secure, and still not feel the stability that was promised in all of these objects and things that we go after, including our own practice. Some of us are very discouraged, very disappointed about our practices and our spiritual communities, and where we are, because the unfolding is not to our liking.

And I've experienced that myself, in my practice as a Zen practitioner—or even as a Christian, when I practiced Christianity—being very disappointed about what I thought should be happening. “I should become awake. I should become renewed. I should become enlightened. I should become as Jesus. I should become as Buddha. I should be filled with wisdom. This is why I have taken on this path. I have gone after this object of becoming better, a way of managing my life from pain and suffering, and managing my life toward stability and security, and all of these things that I thought would bring me freedom, bring me liberation.” So, as I practiced, I realized that this heading toward material and spiritual satisfaction is not at all freedom. It is not at all freedom. And, matter of fact, it's very exhausting. It's very exhausting to take the stones out of your water, carry them someplace else, or take some more stones and bring them back. Very exhausting.

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So I tried on an activity and maybe you could try this activity yourself. I tried on this activity, one week, of just allowing things to happen in my life without doing anything about it. It was an interesting project. Very difficult. You know, “Don’t I need to make those phone calls? Because if I don’t call them, then they’re not going to know whether or not.” Or, “Shouldn’t I do this, because that might not happen?” Or, “Shouldn’t I explain to so-and-so why I’m not doing this or that?” And all that came to mind, but I didn’t respond to it. I sat and allowed the unfolding of my life, and I just allowed these things to come into my mind, and I did the things that came to me to do, the things that came to my lap. I must get up and do certain things. I have to cook. I have to wash clothes. I have to maybe meet someone for tea. I did those things that were coming to my life, as opposed to the things I was *bringing* to my life. I was sitting with the stones that were already in my water, rather than bringing stones to it, creating some kind of false illusion of a creek, of a river.

So that was a great experience, just sitting for a week and allowing these things to come through. And isn’t this exactly what we do when we go away for our seven-day meditation retreats, or when we go for a sesshin, as we say in Zen, which is just to come to the “matter of the heart”? You’re just sitting right with the matter of the heart and the breath, and you’re just allowing life to happen. Things are happening, even though you’re sitting there. Someone’s talking, someone’s coughing, someone’s sleeping, someone’s fixing the meal, someone’s working in the garden, all of these—life is happening. And so when it meets you—when life meets *you*, when they ring the bell and it’s time for you to stand up—that’s when, “Oh, I’ve come to this beautiful stone of standing up and allowing my water to flow over this stone of ‘standing up.’ And then we sit down, and I allow my life to flow over this stone called ‘sitting down.’”

And it makes for a wonderful life, until the mind says, “Well, should I sit over there, or sit over here? Or should I stand over there, or stand over here?” When we begin to—our motivations start coming into play, our fears start coming into play, our habits. You know, we’re afraid: “Maybe this is wrong, or this is not the right way.” Or our habits come: “Usually, I sit over there,” or, “Usually, I stand *this* way. This person’s in my way.” So, when these things start coming into play, this is how our life is, too. We start to manage it, and as soon as we start to manage it, we remove ourselves from the freedom that Buddha spoke of.

Now, Buddha wouldn’t use the words, “Stop managing your life,” or even anything about reality—managing a reality—but he did speak on looking at what we crave, looking at not knowing, that what we are in is an interrelationship with everything and everyone. So the Buddha says, “Look at your cravings, look at your habits and your patterns,” so that you—not to

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say, “Okay, this is how I do things; I need to stop this,” or, “Look at my patterns; I need to stop *this*,” or, “Look at what I’m craving; oh, my gosh,” but to look at them to see how these things take you away from the interrelationship, the natural unfolding of life—how you are naturally, organically, unfolding with everything and everyone.

And so when we begin to *manage*—again, I just want to put that word. It’s not Buddha’s word. He says, “When we begin to crave, or we become ignorant”—he used that word, maybe. Maybe there’s a Sanskrit word for it. I’m not speaking Sanskrit, or the words he used, or Pali. But when we become ignorant—which means “to not know”—of the interrelationship between everything and everyone, the management of our lives rises, and we get very busy, and we get turned away, and then we begin to suffer, because we’re not flowing with what is being put into our lives, what is sitting already in our lives.

So I’m going to look at my notes for a little while, to make sure I’m including all the things I’d like to speak with you about, so. I’d like to talk about several kinds of fears, and there’s the fear of the unknown, when we’re moving away from freedom, and the fear of humiliation, the fear of pain, fear of loss, or disbelief in one’s own capabilities. That’s a really great fear—that we’re not capable even of this life, so we really manage this life to make sure we *look* capable, we appear as though we know what we’re doing. We want to be right. We want to be on top. We want to be in position. We want promotion. We want status. These are all things that come to mind when we begin to manage our lives.

And so I want us to stop for a moment, and just take a breath in and see if we’re not managing our lives right now, as I am speaking. Are you trying to get something so that you can use it to manage your life today or tomorrow or in the future? So let’s breathe into that. Let’s breathe into that need for security, for ground, for knowing. Let’s breathe into that feeling of wanting to be comfortable in this life how it takes up space in our hearts and mind and body.

And as you breathe, I want you to imagine just settling into that river that you *are*—the river that you are—and letting the security and the knowing and the comfort and the grounding slip away, sort of like when you step into the ocean, and the sand feels like it’s going to hold you, and then suddenly the sand starts slipping away, and you’re like, “Oh, my God, I better swim. Oh, my God, I better run.” Whichever way you go. Just notice that. You know the experience. So don’t manage. Just slip. If you can’t swim, step back until you are ready, until you have set long enough to trust your own water.

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In the poem that I read you earlier, there's a part that says, “Hold open what it means to be alive, still breathing, despite all that has burned away in your living through fire. Dare you sweep up the ashes, whittle and sand the charred pieces, and make a smooth mound of yourself—a mound that, if breathed upon, will float you back to the silence of your beginnings?” And so that's often what we do. A lot that happens in our experience is like fire—it burns us. And the ashes, we try to gather those ashes and make a new self with those ashes. And the new self, we think, is the beginning, and then we trot off with the new self that eventually, even if we breathe upon it, might just disappear. So, “if breathed upon, will float us back to the silence of our beginnings.” So I know some of us have experienced that in our life, where we're beginning over and over and over again. I certainly have. I certainly have.

So I want us to make a commitment during this four-part series, and the commitment is to, first of all, look at that word *management*, and to trust that there's something greater than management. There's something greater in our life, greater than management: greater than managing our anger, managing our love, managing our—whatever—our joy, our sadness, our grief. There's something greater than that.

And so, what the Buddha offered us were three jewels, and these three jewels are very important to our practice. The three jewels are Buddha, dharma, and sangha. So a lot of people say, “Oh, he's offered these three jewels,” and they're explained very deeply in many texts and by many teachers, but I like to offer these jewels as examples of freedom—as paths of freedom, actually—and that the Buddha, or a teacher that's in your life, or teachers, are examples of freedom.

You can look to the Buddha—or look to the teacher, or teachers, or what is teaching you—as an example of freedom. When you're managing your life, you want to have a refuge in this. Just take refuge in the example of freedom, and Buddha is an example of freedom. Maybe you have an example. Maybe it's Jesus. Maybe it is another teacher. Maybe it's a teacher in the Hindu or Islamic practice. Whatever an example of freedom is, when you begin to manage your life, take refuge in that example of freedom. Take refuge in that, to bring you some relief, to bring you the freedom.

And so then there's dharma. So dharma is an example of a path of freedom. So dharma is a name that we use to talk about the path of the teachings of Buddha. But maybe your path is in another spirituality or religion, or in no religion at all, but there is a path that you follow, in which there's

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some teachings. So you can take refuge in those teachings, in the dharma, as an example of the path of freedom, when managing your life becomes overwhelming. When you feel overwhelmed by what you need to do, what you *think* you need to do, you can take refuge in an example of the path of the teachings, an example of the path of freedom. There are examples all around us. You can take refuge in them.

Or you can take refuge in an example of a sangha, or a community, or a companionship of freedom, a companionship of friends, in which there's freedom. So when you feel you're moving along in life, alone, just stopping and taking that breath, and you're taking the refuge in the companionship in freedom. There's companionship in freedom, and there's examples of this companionship, is your community, your sangha, those—and folks, family members and friends—in which you are working together on a level greater than management.

And what the Buddha taught us to take refuge in was Buddha—the three jewels—which are Buddha, dharma, and sangha. Buddha, dharma, and sangha. So if these words don't mean anything, I'd like to use in this series, let's take refuge in an example of freedom, and Buddha is an example. His life is an example. Maybe it's Jesus, for you, or some other prophet or sage or teacher. Use that as an example of freedom. So, when you're taking refuge in freedom, you want to take refuge in an example of freedom. So, when you're overwhelmed with managing your life, take refuge in an example—in an example of freedom—or take refuge in an example of a *path* of freedom.

That would be dharma. Take refuge in an example of a path of freedom, is what we call dharma in a Buddhist practice, where the teachings can relieve you of you managing this unfolding, from trying to manage that which you cannot manage. So—or, three, you can take example—take refuge in an example of a companionship in freedom, and that would be sangha, or community... and that is people being around people that are interested, and the inquiry is there about this unfolding of life. They're interested in wisdom, in insight, in understanding, and they're interested in interrelationship. They're interested in being a part of this unsurpassed living. That is a sangha. That is a group of people you want to be with when you feel overwhelmed by managing your life.

So the homework for this—and it's *homework* meaning *home*: your home and your heart, not something you'll bring back, not something that you have to excel in. If you'd like to share it with us—your process—that's fine. That would be great. But this is something that I ask you to

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bring into your heart, the question that we begin with: How can we secure a life that is groundless by nature? How can we secure a life that is groundless by nature? So I actually would like you to take a walk in nature, and if you can't get in nature, just take a walk down your street, on your way to work, around your block. Take a walk with this question: How can you secure a life that is groundless by nature?

How can you refrain from taking the ashes that keep coming, and making a new you that you also manage? That's the groundlessness of life. The groundlessness of life is the fire coming in the ashes. How can we not manage that fire?

So I'd like us to—I'd like to read the poem one more time, and then we'll sit in silence, and I'll ring the bell. So the poem is “In the Wild.”

The path is life, and the purpose of life is to live it: to be soothed by its waters, still flowing, and warmed by the sun that reaches those who stand boldly in the open. Live this moment, and life stretches into eternity, revealing the stars flung into the vastness of your night. Hold open what it means to be alive and still breathing, despite all that has burned away in your living through fire.

Dare you sweep up the ashes, and whittle and sand the charred pieces, and make a smooth mound of yourself—a mound that, if breathed upon, will float you back to the silence of your beginnings? Your arrival is now, landing on a new shore, a lifeline cast beyond anything imposed by the shadows of what appeared as mountains, beyond the distorted reflections in puddles that seemed to be watering holes, past the fuel of desire mistaken for the sun. Might your fear be the onset of freedom from your beliefs, causing tremors, or the fear that you are still breathing after having spent your generous years at wishing wells?

Might your fear be that breathing in and breathing out is too simple of a contribution to the great, unsurpassed journey of life? No need to gather your breath and store it in your belly. Your breath is to be heard in the wild nature of all things. Like a bird's song, like the call of bison, your breath is to be discharged into the world, ascended up from the earth of ancestors, out into the atmosphere of a million realms. This is life.”

And so let's breathe that in, just in silence, and just being—just breathe and allow this moment to unfold.

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And now we'll ring the bell. Look forward to seeing you next time. I'm going to ring the bell again. Okay? I look forward to seeing you for Part Two. Thank you.