

Zenju Earthlyn Manuel
Week Three, *It's Beyond Me: Freedom from Managing Your Life*
March 16, 2015
“The Natural Unfolding of the Dharma”
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Greetings. This is Zenju, and welcome to part three of a four part series: Freedom from Managing Your Reality, or, like I say, “managing your life.” And so I’d like us to begin with just silence, as we have done with the other sessions. And so, if you would, just begin by breathing and coming into this session, and just using your breath to listen, rather than your—I don’t say “ears,” because we use our minds, sometimes. So let’s use our breath to listen, and we’re just breathing and just being in the awareness of being alive.

So we’re not doing anything. We’re not even meditating. We’re just being quiet right now. So, if you don’t know how to meditate, that’s not a problem. Right now, we’re just in the silence. We’re just doing nothing. We’re doing nothing, and we’re being nobody. And when I ring the bell, you can open your eyes or come back into a more wakeful state.

So I’d like to share another poem with you, as I’ve shared in the last sessions. And all these poems I have written, and this is another one. It’s called “Greetings”:

“I have absorbed the unexplainable things in life, the way a flash of light comes in the dark woods, the words in my head coming from someone else; the appearance of a friend at my door, after silently calling out her name. To ask the reasons is like stripping the ocean of its waves. The nature of life soaks through my skin, and there is no mind, scientific or spiritual, that can fully explain the unfolding that rises, unfurls, and lands upon me in the silence. And so I am inclined to sit still, be drenched, hands open, eyes open, patiently waiting to greet what is there.”

And I like that poem because it gives you that sense of what we were talking about as freedom, in terms of this organic unfolding. So we’re sitting still, somewhat, in our lives anyway. There’s a stillness that’s inside us, where the hands are open, and we’re just greeting what comes, greeting what unfolds, and being and meeting it. And so I like that poem, that it gives you that feeling of that waiting for, what is there to come? What is life? What is life bringing us? And if we’re managing our lives, we’re not going to see it. We may miss it.

And so last week’s question was: “If you are managing your reality, your life, how can you come into a full blossom of that which is unknown to you at this time?” So that’s last week’s question, and you were to walk with that question to see, if you are managing your reality, your life, how can you come into a full blossom of what is coming to you, what is unknown? How can you know what you are blossoming into? You may want to. You might have an idea what you want to blossom into. You know, “I want to be a bird of paradise. I want to be a rose. I want to be, you

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know, orchid.” You might have some idea. But perhaps there *is* something greater—something different—that we don’t know.

And so we talked about that last week, and we also talked about using an example of freedom, and taking refuge in that example. And then we used the example of Buddha as an example of freedom, and Buddha as the “awakened one,” or Buddha, the historical Buddha; Siddhartha, or Shakyamuni Buddha, as an example of freedom. We have many examples around us that we can take refuge in when we feel overwhelmed in managing our lives, and so we talked about that one. And I asked you to take a commitment *to* freedom, from the beginning, and *freedom* meaning the unfolding of our lives, just allowing our lives to unfold naturally, and understanding the integrality of that life.

And so today we’re going to talk about the example of a path of freedom, and the example of a path of freedom is dharma, which is also one of the three jewels. Such as Buddha is one of the three jewels, dharma is also one of the three jewels. And so we want to see it as the dharma, as an example, that these are laid-out teachings. They are universal truths that exist in life. And the dharma, in terms of Buddhist teachings, are actually laid out for us, so we’re very fortunate, for those who want to follow his teachings, to study them and to walk them. So we do have examples. When we get overwhelmed with managing our lives, we can simply take refuge in dharma. Buddha—we can take refuge in Buddha, and we can take refuge in dharma, as examples of freedom. Buddha’s an example of freedom. The dharma is an example of the path of freedom, because the teachings are laid out.

And so, many times we study these teachings. We get books, and we read them. We read all about the universal truths that exist, not always Buddhist books, necessarily, but we read about wakefulness, nirvana, we read about enlightenment, these various qualities of life that we’d like to have—we’d like to possess, actually—in our lives. And so this is not necessarily taking on these teachings in an unfolding way. So, what happens sometimes is we’ll read the book, and then we try to manage our lives accordingly. If I understand, say, we read Buddhist teachings on right speech, and then suddenly we go out and we’d start to manage our lives around right speech. We start to manage our reality around, “This is how I should speak so that I am in right speech.” And we immediately do that after we have read the book, or we have read the teachings. We might even do that if we’re people who follow Christ’s path. We might read the Bible, or we might read the Quran. On all of these things, we read them, or a teacher has told these teachings to us, and we begin to manage our lives around them, maybe even what *I’m* presenting. You might begin to even manage your lives around managing your life, and that is not the path of freedom. That is not the natural unfolding.

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So, what would be the natural unfolding of an example of teachings, an example of freedom? What is the natural unfolding of dharma? And so I have a question to help us with that. How do you know the path of life, that which has not been unfolded? How do you know about enlightenment? How do you know about the, let's say, right speech, as I was speaking of? How do you know about it, other than what you have read, or other than what someone has told you? How do you know about it? More likely, you don't. More likely, you don't. You have an idea about it. Your mind has intellectualized it, your mind has interpreted it for you, and then you begin to manage your lives around it.

So this is not freedom. This is not the example of a path of freedom that dharma has presented. The path of freedom of dharma, yes, are teachings, and they are laid out, and they are written, and they are taught. But the path of freedom is to walk it—is to walk *it*—and that means you have to live it. You have to find a way of understanding these teachings through your life, as your life unfolds. You may not understand right speech on the moment you've read it. You'll understand it in the midst of a conversation in which your emotions are so high. You might be so angry or so frustrated or so sad or so something—and your life is unfolding before you in these emotions, and then, and only then, do you begin to understand right speech.

So, if we can understand the teachings that are laid out for us that bring us freedom, if we can understand them through our life, and understand them as they unfold, we will do less managing of our life. We are less likely to manage it, to be exhausted by it, to be frustrated by it; to be frustrated when we say the wrong things, and go, “Oh, I didn't get it,” rather than realizing, when we say the wrong thing, the teaching of right speech is unfolding itself in your life. So that is a way of looking at your life and not managing it, to even allow the teachings, to even allow the path of freedom, to unfold in front of you.

So, very often, people will be speaking with me. Students may use a lot of Buddhist terminology, and they've just started practicing, a year or less. And the terminology, when they speak it, is not embodied yet, but I do love when they use it, because it means that they're beginning to at least plant the seed in their lives. So it doesn't mean you can't speak of these things, speak of the teachings that are being planted in your life. But it's very hard to really understand it unless it's unfolding. You cannot manage it *into* your life. You can't manage right speech into your life. You can't manage enlightenment into your life. It's just not the way. Freedom is actually very exhausting.

So I want to tell you a story that might help you understand this further. A long time ago, very early in my publishing career, I wrote a book, and I went to a bookstore to talk to the people there about it. And after I spoke, one of the participants in the event raised her hand and said,

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“You said the word ‘be present,’ you know, you need to ‘be present.’” And she said, “What does that mean? What do you mean by ‘be present’? What does it really mean?” And when she said it, I was stumped. There was a great amount of silence. I was still early on in my practice following Buddhist teachings. I had read a lot of new-age books—probably where I picked up the term—but I really couldn’t answer her question. I was stumped. And actually, my mind began to start to manage her question, even without me speaking. I was like, “Wow, is she trying to trip me up? Am I failing here? Why is she asking such a question when there probably really isn’t any answer?” My mind began to manage this place in which I wanted to maintain some place of being intellectual, some place of being composed, some place of knowing. So, eventually, I gave her some answer. I couldn’t tell you what I said, at this time, but I present the story to show that it’s not always good to talk about what we haven’t walked; that the path of freedom is walking it.

We have to walk it to know it. We have to know the teachings. We have to know the dharma. It’s a jewel, but we have to get to know it. We can’t say, “Oh, I know dharma. It’s a jewel, it’s the teachings, and this is what Buddha said.” That will not sustain us. It doesn’t sustain your life. It actually may be even make it more complex, more complicated, when we have a lot of knowledge about what we’ve read. We’re carrying it around inside us, so it’s more complicated.

So, what’s the easy path? It’s just as I said in the poem: “Be inclined to sit still. Be drenched, hands open, eyes open, patiently waiting to greet what is there.” And that is what some of us do in our practice, when we go to meditation retreats: We sit. Or even just now, before this session, we were sitting quietly and being with our breath, just allowing life to come forward. I want to take a look at my notes to make sure we’re covering the points that I’d like to cover.

So I’m going to ask that question again. Our question today is, “How do you know the path of life, the one that you’re trying to manage, that which hasn’t unfolded yet?” So there’s a way in which we try to jump forward to the end. So we have an idea, a vision. We have an idea, a dream, and we say we’re going to get *here*. “I’m going to be a healer. I’m going to be a teacher. I’m going to be a lawyer.” And so we spend much of our life doing that, until something else comes in. Then we might change. And so what we’re doing is we’re trying to grab onto something that cannot be grabbed onto: our lives. It cannot be held. It can only be, well, it can’t be clenched onto. It can be before us, but it’s hard to grab, like the air.

We can’t grab it and say, “Well, if I grab this part, I’ll become a teacher. If I grab this part, I’ll become a healer. If I do this, I will become that.” And then we think we’re there. When we get the title, we’re there. But life is still going on, life is still unfolding, and we’re not there. And that’s when the management might even become more intense: “Well, I must do this more, in order to make sure that this happens.” And so as we go, our ears go, our management becomes

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more and more intense, unless something happens to us. Eventually, some of us have things that come into our lives that will put a stop to a lot of it—a lot of the management.

So, I think I will tell this story. There's this story that's told by a teacher called Mujiij, and he tells this story about a king, and the king is very prominent, and he worked very hard, probably, to become a king or it was handed to him. But even as the title was handed to him, he had to do certain things. He has to manage his life in a particular way to be king. And so this king felt he was there, and he was managing his life, until a visitor came to the door. So a visitor came to the door, and I'm going to tell the story the best way I can.

He knocks on the door—knock, knock—and the guard at the door comes to the door and says, “Who’s calling?” And he opens the door, and he sees this man, probably a *sadhu*, because the man is naked and all he has is a stick, a staff, and he’s standing at the door.

And he says, “I’m here to see the king.” And he says, “Well, who are you? Who are you?” And he says, “Are you one of the king’s ministers?” That’s what he says. And he says, “No. I am not that. I am higher than that. I am higher than that.” And so the guard runs. He says, “There’s a man at the door, a *sadhu*. I think he’s a *sadhu*. He’s naked. I asked him if he’s one of your ministers, and he says he’s not; he’s higher than that.” And so the king says, “What? He’s higher than one of my ministers? Well, then go back and ask him, is he one of my advisors?” And then, so the guard goes back to the door. He opens up the door. This man’s still there. He’s naked. He says, “The king wants to know, who are you? Are you one of his advisors?” And the *sadhu* goes, “No. I am higher than that.”

And so the guard runs back to the king, and he says, “He says no, he’s higher than that. He’s higher than your advisor.” And the king goes, “Well, who is this? What is he one of my counselors?” And so the guy goes back, and he says, “Hello. The king wants to know, are you one of his counselors?” And he goes, “No. I am higher than that.” And then, so this goes on again. He goes back. He says, “No, he’s not. He said he’s higher than that.” And he says, “Oh. Well, then he must be a prophet. Find out if he’s a prophet.” And so the guard goes back. He says, “The king wants to know, are you a prophet?” And he says, “No. I am higher than that.” And then, so the guard goes back.

He says, “King, I’m very uncomfortable. I don’t know what’s going on here. The man says he is higher than a prophet.” And the king is stumped. He said, “Well, who is this naked man at my door who is higher than a prophet?” And then he says, “Oh, my gosh. Oh, my gosh! Ask him if he’s God!” And so he goes back. The guard goes back to the king, and he says, “The king wants

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to know, are you God?" And then, so the sadhu says, "No. I am higher than that." And then, so he goes back to the king. He goes running. He says, "He says he is higher than God!" And the king says, "Okay, I must meet this person." So he runs. He runs down to the door himself, and he says he wants to see who is it that is saying that they are higher than that, higher than that. He says, "Are you God?" And he says, "I am higher than that."

And the king suddenly realizes that he himself—he kind of folds in. He kind of loses all his powers in the moment when he hears the sadhu say that he's higher than God. He kind of loses his powers in the moment, and falls down and knows to himself that he's been this king all his life, but he realizes that there's something he doesn't know of life, in that moment. And he goes on. He leaves his kingdom and he leaves being a king, because he realizes that he has managed his life up until this point, to the place that he didn't know that there was something higher than that, higher than anything that we know, that we can perceive of. And so that is why, in managing our lives, it's important to let that go, to let go even managing our being kings and queens, and allow our lives to unfold to something higher than that—higher than what we can ever manage to be.

And so the question, again, for today was, "How do you know the path of life, that which has not been unfolded?" How do you know that? And I hope, in asking that question, that you have some relief in managing what you think you need to manage—to step back and be still. So I'd like you to walk with this question this week, is, "How do you know the path of life, that which has not been unfolded and be higher than that, higher than that?"

So I'd like to read the poem one more time, and then we'll sit in silence. It's called "Greetings":

"I have absorbed the unexplainable things in life, the way a flash of light comes in the dark woods, the words in my head coming from someone else; the appearance of a friend at my door, after silently calling out her name. To ask the reasons is like stripping the ocean of its waves. The nature of life soaks through my skin, and there is no mind, scientific or spiritual, that can fully explain the unfolding that rises, unfurls, and lands upon me in the silence. So I am inclined to sit still, be drenched, hands open, eyes open, patiently waiting to greet what is there."

Please sit silently in reflection and breathe, letting go of the words, hands open. What is higher than that? What is higher than that? Higher than that?

Thank you for being here for part three, and I'll see you for the final part four. Be well.

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