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EVERYDAY ZEN: LOVE AND WORK (PLUS)

New Jersey Does Not Exist

We assume that reality is as we see it and that it is fixed and unchanging. For example: if we look outside and see bushes, trees, and cars, we assume that we are seeing things as they are. But that's only how we see reality at ground level. If we are in an airplane at thirty-five thousand feet on a clear day, and we look down, we don't even see people and cars. At that height our reality does not include people, though it will include mountaintops, plains, and bodies of water. As the plane descends our experience of reality changes. Not until the plane is almost on the earth do we have a human landscape, including cars, people, and houses. For an ant crawling along the sidewalk, human beings don't even exist; they're too enormous for an ant. An ant's reality is probably the hills and valleys of the sidewalk. The foot that steps on an ant—what is that?

The reality that we live in needs us to function in certain ways. To do this, we must be distinct from things around us—from the rug, or from another person. But a powerful microscope would reveal that the reality we encounter is not truly separate from us. At a deeper level we are just atoms and atomic particles moving at enormous speed. There is no separation between us and the rug or another person: we are all just one enormous energy field.

Recently my daughter showed me some pictures taken of white blood cells in rabbit arteries. These cells are scavengers whose function is to clean up the debris and unwanted material in the body. Inside the artery you can see the little creatures crawling along, cleaning by forming pseudopodia that extend toward their targets. Reality for a white blood cell is not the reality we see. What is reality to such a cell? We can only observe its work, which is to clean. And right now as we sit here there are millions of these cells inside us, cleaning our arteries as best they can. Looking at the successive shots, one can see the work the cell is trying to do: the cell knows its purpose.

We humans, with probably the most immense gifts of any creature, are the only beings on earth that say, "I don't know the meaning of my life. I don't know what I'm here for." No other creature—certainly not the white blood cell—is confused like that. The white blood cell works tirelessly for us; it's inside of us, cleaning as long as it lives. And of course that's just one of a hundred thousand functions that take place within this enormous intelligence that we are. But because we have a large brain (which is given to us so we can function) we manage to misuse our native gifts and to do mischief that has nothing to do with the welfare of life. Having the gift of thinking, we misuse it and go astray. We expel ourselves from the Garden of Eden. We think not in terms of work that needs to be done for life, but in terms of how we can serve our separate self—an enterprise that never occurs to a white blood cell. In a short time its life will be over; it will be replaced by others. It doesn't think; it just does its work.

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As we do zazen and more and more perceive the illusory nature of our false thinking, the state of natural functioning begins to strengthen. That state is always there; but it's so covered in most of us that we simply don't know what it is. We are so caught in our excitement, our depression, our hopes, and our fears that we cannot see that our function is not to live forever, but to live this moment. We try in vain to protect ourselves with our worried thinking: we plot how we can make it nicer for ourselves, how we can be more secure, how we can perpetuate forever our separate self. Our body has its own wisdom; it's the misuse of our brain that screws up our lives.

A while ago I broke my wrist and wore a cast for three months. When the cast was removed I was touched by what I saw. My hand was just skin and bones, very feeble and trembling; it was too weak to do anything. But when I got home from the hospital and started to do a task with my good hand, this little nothing of skin and bones tried to help. It knew what it was supposed to do. It was almost pathetic: this little skeleton, with no power, still wanted to help. It knew its function. As I looked at it, it seemed to have nothing to do with me; the hand seemed to have its own life; it wanted to get in there and do its work. It was moving to see this little scarecrow trying to do the work of a real hand.

If we don't confuse ourselves we also know what we should be doing in life. But we do confuse ourselves. We engage in odd relationships that have no fruits in them; we get obsessed with a person, or with a movement, or with a philosophy. We do anything except live our life in a functional way. But with practice we begin to see through our confusion, and can discern what we need to do—just as my left hand, even when it couldn't function, still made an effort to contribute, to do the work that needed to be done.

When something really annoys us, irritates us, troubles us, we start to think. We worry, we drag up everything we can think of, and we think and we think and we think—because that's what we believe solves life's problems. In fact what solves life's problems is simply to experience the difficulty that's going on, and then to act out of that. Suppose my child has screamed at me and told me I'm a terrible mother. What do I do? I could justify myself to her, explain all the wonderful things I did for her. But what heals that situation, really? Simply experiencing the pain of what's happened, seeing all my thoughts about it. When I do that sincerely and patiently, I can begin to sense my child differently, and I can begin to see what to do. My action emerges from my experience. But we don't do that with the problems of life; instead we spin with them, we try to analyze them or try to find who's to blame for them. And when we have done all that, we try to figure out an action. That's backwards. We've cut ourselves off from the problem; with all our thinking, reacting, analyzing, we can't solve it. The blockage of our emotion thought makes the problem unsolvable.