

SEEING THROUGH THE SUPERSTRUCTURE (excerpt)  
from Everyday ZEN by Charlotte Joko Beck (pp.136-144)

Suppose that we talk about our life as though it were a house, and we live in this house, and life goes along as it goes along. We have our stormy days, our nice days; sometimes the house needs a little paint. And all the drama that goes on within the house between those who live there just goes on. We may be sick or well. We may be happy or unhappy. It's like this for most of us. We just live our life, we live in a house or an apartment and things take place as they take place. But—and this is when practice becomes important—we have this house but it's as though it were encased in another house...We have our perfectly nice house, and on top of that house we have another house, encasing this basic house in which we live.

Yet our life (the house) as we live it is perfectly fine. We don't usually think so, but there's nothing wrong with our life. Just as it is. But we erect, right on top of the house we have, an extra one. And if we haven't looked closely at what we've added on, the extra layer can be very thick and dark. The house we live in will then seem dim and confined because we've covered it over with something heavy. That covering can seem impenetrable, frightening, depressing. The biggest error we make in our life and our practice is to think that this house we're living in—which is our life just as it is, with all of its problems, all of its ups and down—has something wrong with it. And because we think that, we get busy. We've been busy most of the years of our life adding that extra structure.

Zen practice is first of all to see that we have done that; and then it is about seeing what the superstructure is—how it operates, what it's made of, what we have to do with it or what we don't have to do with it. Usually we think, "It's unpleasant; I must get rid of it." No, I don't think that's the way. Essentially, this extra structure covering our life has no reality. It has come to be there because of the misuse of our minds. It's not a question of getting rid of it, since it has no reality; but it *is* a question of seeing its nature. And as we see its nature instead of it being so thick and dark, the covering becomes more transparent: we see through it.

Enlightenment (bringing more light) is what happens in practice. Actually we're not getting rid of a structure, we're seeing through it as the dream it is, and as we realize its true nature its whole function in our life weakens; and at the same time we can see more accurately what is going on in our daily life. It's as if we have to go full circle. Our life is always all right. There's nothing wrong with it. Even if we have horrendous problems, it's just our life. But since we refuse to accept life as it is, because of our preference for things that are pleasurable, we pick and choose

from life. Said another way, we have no intention of settling for life as it is when it does not suit us.

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Because of our unwillingness for life to be the way it is, we always add something extra. There is no one here who doesn't do that. Nobody. As long as we live, we will probably always have at least a thin overcoating on the essential structure of our life. But how much is the question.

Zen practice isn't about a special place or a special peace, or something other than being with our life just as it is. It's one of the hardest things for people to get: that my very difficulties in this very moment *are* the perfection. "What do you mean, they're the perfection? I'm gonna practice and get rid of them!" No we don't have to get rid of them, but we must see their nature. The structure becomes thinner (or seems thinner); it gets lighter and occasionally we may crack a hole right through it. Occasionally. So one thing I want you to do is to identify for yourself what it is in your life right now that you're not willing to have be as it is...Even if what is happening is fearful and distressing, it's fine. It's very difficult to get that. Strong practice is needed to make even a dent in our habitual way of viewing life. It's hard to get that we don't have to get rid of the calamity. The calamity is fine. You don't have to like it, but it's fine.

The first step in practice is to realize that we have erected this superstructure. As we do zazen (particularly as we label our thoughts) we begin to recognize that we're almost never just living our life as it is. Our lives are lost in our self-centered thoughts, the superstructure.

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So the process of practice is, first of all, to have an awareness, maybe dim at first, of what we have erected; and the second step is to practice. Liberation is to see through this unreal superstructure that we've built. With it, life just goes along as it goes along with no obstacle. Does that make sense? Sounds crazy, doesn't it?