



## *Our Substitute Life*

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AS WE LIVE TOGETHER, IT BECOMES painfully clear how important a life of practice really is. The mayhem and pain we cause when we don't know what our life is, the punishment we inflict on ourselves and on others—it's almost inconceivable. And there is no medal given for practicing, no trophy. But if we don't practice, and understand *what* practice is, we will continue to suffer.

Many of us still have the strange belief that having an enlightenment experience will dispel all of this pain, that it will completely cancel our unhappiness. But the ambition to "become" enlightened can be a serious distortion of practice. Our very nature is enlightenment. What practice is about is seeing how we block our natural state of being, and what it means to work through this blockage.

So let us consider our basic illusion—the blockage—that is the source of our unsatisfactory, substitute life. And make no mistake: all of us, to some degree, are living a fake or substitute life.

How does this misfortune come about? Our substitute life is born out of a core of conditioning, which is formed from the inevitable and innumerable disappointments of our early years. Our struggles with them result in more and more fixed beliefs about ourselves and the world.

In time, our core belief—always negative and always painful—

becomes more fixed and rigid. It becomes a truth we hold so deeply that it is not even open to question: "I am unlovable," "I am hopeless, worthless," "I am alone, abandoned," "I am unable to succeed," "I am unable to do it right," "I am separate from the rest of humanity." The devastating and painful character of our core belief drives each one of us to find ways to hide its existence from ourselves and others.

To do this, we develop many strategies for covering the aching, quivering hole of pain. If my core belief is "I am unlovable," I may try to please and placate others in ways neither appropriate nor wise. Another strategy might be just the opposite: to withdraw and deny any contact whatsoever. We may remain confused all our life about our puzzling behavior.

Our strategy may often look like the opposite of our hidden core belief. The hard-driving businessperson (or artist, or mother, or athlete) may look as if he or she is doing great things in the world—and such may be the case. But if in these efforts there is a feeling of dissatisfaction, or of something missing, then the action or work is being pushed by the poisonous and hidden core belief. "I am unable to succeed . . . I am an impostor . . . I never was any good . . . If they really knew the truth about me . . . I don't deserve to live." Sounds strange, doesn't it? But it is true of all of us, at least some of the time.

As we sit, we become increasingly sensitive to our patterns and strategies. Therapy can also help uncover them. But sitting—day after day, year after year—also builds the power or courage to move beyond seeing the mental "stuff" to the even more crucial step of returning to the bodily experience.

Why return to the body? Why is it crucial to our practice and therefore our life? We return so we can experience directly—not in words—the quivering pain out of which our core belief was formed.

When, in sitting or in life, we become aware of any disappointment, any emotional reaction—any sense of dis-ease in our body—we know that we are picking up a trace of our core belief. So we need to ask ourselves, "What is the core of this dis-ease?" It's not a simple question that can be answered by a simple thought.

In fact, thought of any sort, simple or complex, rational or irrational, cannot lead us to freedom from our core belief. (Thinking is, of course, a valuable and indispensable tool in living. It just isn't the best tool in understanding what our life is.) Only one endeavor helps. We

must abandon our mistaken trust in *thinking* as a path to freedom and turn in one direction only: to experience in our body the pain of the core belief itself. We have to face the pain we have been running from. In fact, we need to learn to rest in it and let its searing power transform us. When we truly rest in this bodily sensation, there's a knowing, an exact resonating in the body. And finally there is a spaciousness and peace in which we see ourselves and our actions in a new light.

It should be emphasized that experiential practice and investigation of our core belief is not analysis. Nor can it be reduced to some formula. Teachers can help keep us on track. It's not that they have completed their own work, but still they can help us to clarify what we're seeing and doing.

Until this return to bodily experience is the base of our sitting (and our daily practice), our lives will not transform. Why? Until our core belief is experienced directly in the body, even if mentally we "understand" it, it will continue to run our lives. Its poisonous footprints will be all over our living—our relationships, our work, everything—with accompanying discomfort and dissatisfaction. For instance, if we have the core belief, "I'll never make it," we'll make sure this belief is realized in our life: we will fail. Our core belief may be almost unconscious, but we believe it, we fear it, and we obey it. In fact, we believe in our core belief as the deepest truth about ourselves.

Often, questions arise: "What does this have to do with Zen? Isn't this just psychology?" What these questions reveal is that the basic human problem has not yet been grasped. The fact is that we are definitely psychological beings—many of the barriers to leading a more open, more free, more giving life come directly from our psychologically rooted core beliefs. These beliefs are like boundaries; they cut us off from awareness of our true nature, our naturally open heart. And Zen practice has always been about exactly this: seeing through our boundaries, our self-images, our artificial separations of mind.

This is not to say that psychology is all there is to practice—nor that we are following most standard psychological models, which are often (not always) primarily concerned with changing our self, fixing our self up. What we are talking about is not fixing ourselves up—it's about *seeing*. It's not about judging, or changing, or improving, or ana-

lyzing. It's about seeing the truth about who we really are, seeing from a much bigger container of awareness.

To do this, we have to see the extent of our belief-based substitute life. And further (and this is where this practice departs from most traditional psychologies), we have to willingly experience the pain or the "hole" that this substitute life was originally meant to cover over and protect us from. We begin to look at our disappointment, our anger, and then perhaps to go down layer after layer to the hurt, to the grief, to the fear which usually lie underneath.

If we really stay with this experience, it will eventually take us back to the original hole—whether we experience it as being separate, feeling abandoned, feeling utterly hopeless, full of fear and dread—whatever its flavor. Only by uncovering and entering this most dreaded part of ourselves can we see through this artificial construct of our substitute life—and ultimately connect with awareness of our basic wholeness.

So the "secret" of life that we are all looking for is just this: to develop through sitting and daily life practice the power and courage to return to that which we have spent a lifetime hiding from, to rest in the bodily experience of the present moment—even if it is a feeling of being humiliated, of failing, of abandonment, of unfairness. We learn to rest in our experience *without thought*, to sink into a nondual state. Even if we can stay only a few seconds at first, with time and development we can learn to rest there for long periods of time.

As we rest in this nonduality, we leave behind the phenomenal world of problems and dualistic solutions. We start with including and clarifying our psychological world, but we end in a transformation that cannot be really described in words. We can only suggest a way of living that is free, compassionate, functional. And in this way our so-called problems can be dealt with in a more open and compassionate manner.

Call this enlightenment if you wish. But please remember: we do not do this bodily experiencing just once, or in one sitting. We are describing a lifetime process with many ups and downs, probably one that is never complete. It doesn't matter! What does matter is the slow, slow shift in the way we see and live our lives. This is Zen practice and an end to our substitute life.