



Becoming Free of Our Substitute Life, by Ezra Bayda

A Zen student walked in to see the master. Sitting down, he blurted out, "There's something terribly wrong with me!" The master looked at him and asked, "What's so wrong?" The student, after a moment's hesitation, responded, "I think I'm a dog." To that the master responded, "And how long have you thought that?" The student replied, "Ever since I was a puppy."

What does this story have to do with spiritual practice? Everything. It puts the basic human problem in a nutshell. Next time you find yourself immersed in the drama of a strong emotional reaction, awash with deeply believed thoughts, ask yourself how long you've taken these thoughts to be the truth. Especially notice the ones you believe the most: "Life is too hard," "No one will ever be there for me," "I'm worthless," "I'm hopeless." How long have you believed these thoughts? Ever since you were a puppy!

These deeply held beliefs may not be visible on the surface of our minds; we're often not even aware of them. Yet we cling to such deep-seated beliefs, these basic identities, because they've become rooted in our very cells—in our cellular memory. And their imprint on our lives is unmistakable. But in order to avoid experiencing the painful quality of these beliefs and identities, we continually engage in various strategies of behavior—habitual coping patterns that buffer us from the anxious quiver of insecurity. These strategies are our attempt to establish some sense of safety, security, and familiarity. They might include seeking achievements, becoming a helper, trying to control our world or withdrawing toward safety. But do they ever give us a sense of genuine satisfaction? No. All too often they keep us stuck in dissatisfaction, not knowing where to turn. I call this place "the substitute life."

If we're fortunate enough to aspire to become free of our substitute or artificial life, we may start questioning our most basic assumptions, including our very mode of living. Although such questioning can be painful, it's something we all need to do periodically in order to move toward a genuine life. The one question that goes directly to the heart of the matter is: "What is my life really about?" The degree to which we can be honest in answering this question will determine our clarity in understanding the basic human dilemma—that we are cut off from awareness of our true nature.

[...] Do you try to maintain a sense of order and control, to avoid feeling the fear of chaos, of things falling apart? Do you try to gain acceptance and approval, to avoid the fear of rejection, of not fitting in? Do you try to excel and attain success, to avoid the fear

of feeling unworthy? Or do you seek busyness in adventure or pleasure, to avoid the deep holes of longing and loneliness? All of these strategies have one thing in common: they keep us encased in our artificial or substitute life.

None of us are beyond this. We all follow some strategy to escape feeling the fears that silently run our life. Yet even when we know all about these fears, most of the time we don't want to have anything to do with them. Perhaps this sounds pessimistic and discouraging, but it doesn't have to be. In fact, it's only by realizing the extent to which we are asleep—the extent to which we are driven by the vanity of our endeavors, the smallness of our attachments, or the urgency of avoiding our fears—that we can wake up, out of our state of sleep, out of our substitute way of living.

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