

# Beginner's Mind

*The Examined Life*

## Introduction

Beginner's Mind is an aspect of mindfulness that is very important, yet difficult to explain because of its utter simplicity. Beginner's mind is innocent of preconceptions and expectations, judgments and prejudices. Perhaps it is helpful to think of beginner's mind as the mind that faces life like a small child, full of curiosity and wonder and amazement. "I wonder what this is? I wonder what that is? I wonder what this means?"—without approaching things with a fixed point of view or a prior judgment, just asking "what is it?"

Recall the Socratic conception of wisdom: knowing that one doesn't know. If we have the answer already, then there is no need for us to look; we stay stuck in the same mind-set as always, reacting to things as always. When we see the same things, interpret them the same ways, react to them in the same ways, nothing ever changes.

To have the beginner's mind is to look at things as if you were seeing them for the first time. Beginner's mind can help us to see things in a new light, rather than automatically respond to them with the same old patterns of behavior—this is because we are “letting go” of and not using our automatic, everyday interpretations of people, things, and events.

Another important part of developing the beginners mind concerns getting rid of the "Been There, Done That" concept that seems so prevalent in today's society. It may be true that you have been there, and you may have done that, but perhaps your conception of reality was not the whole concept, "the big picture" if you will.

Living as if we always “know” is a tremendous handicap that keeps us out of the present, and living in the past. It doesn't allow us anything new, no surprises, no insights, no discoveries. It doesn't allow us to unlock and understand any of the mysteries of the present moment, and it keeps us frozen in the judgments of the past.

## A Story

Empty Your Cup

**A university professor went to visit a famous Zen master. While the master quietly served tea, the professor talked about Zen. The master poured the visitor's cup to the brim, and then kept pouring. The professor watched the overflowing cup until he could no longer restrain himself. "It's overfull! No more will go in!" the professor blurted. "You are like this cup," the master replied, "How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"**

So to begin, we must all empty our cups of all the preconceived ideas, concepts, techniques and methods that prevent us from receiving the new. This seems like a simple thing to do, but can be quite difficult in practice. At first we think we are emptying our cups but as we drink from the new knowledge we detect residual tastes of the "old". Sometimes this new mixture can be sweet, like adding honey to tea, but sometimes even a little residue can curdle the whole mix, like adding lemon juice to milk. We must not only empty our cups, but make sure we have a "clean receptacle" so we may taste the "true essence" of the new knowledge.

Finally, beginner's mind doesn't ask you to believe in anything in particular. It simply says put aside the beliefs you already have for a little while, and do the suggested exercises and assignments *without beliefs or expectations*, simply to see in your own direct experience whatever your experience of these exercises is.

## An Exercise

1. Look around your bedroom and find one object that you have had for a long time—something that is very familiar to you. It may be a wall hanging, book, plant, or even a piece of clothing.
2. Sit down somewhere you can view the object you have chosen, close your eyes (if this feels comfortable), and take a few deep breaths. Set your intention to cultivate beginner's mind.
3. Open your eyes and look at the object you have chosen. Imagine you are from Mars and have never seen anything like it before. Really look at the object without judging it.
4. Notice the unique qualities of the object. What does it look like? What does it feel like? Where does it catch shadows or reflect light?
5. Continue to really examine the object. Do you notice anything about it that you hadn't noticed before?
6. When you are done looking at the object, reflect on this exercise. Did you learn anything new about the object you chose? What would it mean if we were able to approach everything in our lives with beginner's mind? Are there objects, people, or situations that you tend to react to "automatically," as if you already know what they are?