

## Beginner's Mind Revisited

Elizabeth and I were talking about how important it is to return to the openness to learning that is the hallmark of beginner's mind. It's interesting to watch the mind that believes it already knows. For example, in this article there may not be any new subject material, but our ability to actually live the material most likely has a long way to go. Beginner's mind doesn't assume it already knows.

One way to invoke beginner's mind is to go back to the fundamentals of practice rooted in the two essential practice questions: "What is going on right now?" and "What is practice in this situation?" You could spend a long time working on these two questions alone and it would no doubt be very fruitful.

Let's start with the first question: What is going on right now? On the most basic level, what is going on is that you're sitting reading this talk. But what else is going on? I find it helpful to break the question down into three components: the physical, the mental, and the emotional. Starting with a short check-in on what is going on right now—what is going on physically? There are three specific areas that you can always bring attention to. The first is your posture. Just feel it now, and adjust as necessary. The second is your facial expression. We're rarely aware of the subtleties of our facial expression. Feel it now, particularly the tension around the mouth and eyes, and soften any tension. The third is overall bodily tension. Feel the whole of yourself, almost as if you were outside of yourself, and then soften and relax into the body.

So when we ask "What is going on right now?" we first check in with the body. Next we check in with the mental component. For example, is the mind clear or foggy? Perhaps it's sleepy or dull. Perhaps it's agitated. The point is, we need to be aware. Here it is often helpful to ask the additional question: "What am I adding?"

For example, we may notice our worries, or our judgments, or one of our endless stories about how things are. Or we may notice our own particular patterns of thinking that we add to the present moment, and tend to get caught in, such as planning, or conversing, or fantasizing.

After checking in with the physical and mental components of what's going on, we check in with our emotional state. Are you contented, or emotionally neutral, or discontented? Again it is helpful to notice what we're adding to the present moment. For



### June Sesshin Enrollment

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example, what tone or mood are you adding? Bored? Anxious? Angry? Notice any dark filters.

The point of asking “What is going on right now?” and doing the precise check-in is to take the first step out of sleep. It’s important to understand that awareness is not like introspection, where we can wander endlessly in the mazes of the mind. We are not concerned with the “why” of self-analysis but with the “what” of who we are. And the specific areas for awareness, as was just mentioned, are: the physical, the mental and the emotional.

Also, awareness is not about memories of the past. It is not about reflections, or free association to future experiences. Awareness is confined to what’s actually going on within the space of the present moment. And further, the attitude is non-judgmental and curious. Any “should” will be antithetical to genuine awareness.

Interestingly, there is always more than one thing going on. But if we’re honest, most of the time we’re hardly aware at all. And if we are aware, we’re usually only aware of one aspect—like physical discomfort, or emotional distress. But to really know what is going on right now is the fundamental first question in all of our practice. It is the first R in the RRR practice of Recognize, Refrain and Return. It is also the first of the Five Questions —“What is actually going on?” So again, just to be aware of what’s going on is the first step out of sleep. The suggestion is to ask this question repeatedly throughout the day, and even more so when we feel that we are somehow stuck.

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Once we’re aware of what’s going on, that is, what’s actually happening in the moment—what we’re feeling, what we’re believing—the next crucial question is: “What is practice in this situation?” Elizabeth gave this the nickname: WIPITS, to help us remember it.

In answering the question, the most important, the most fundamental, point to remember is that *practice is possible in one place alone: here, in exactly what we are experiencing right now*. And what we’re specifically experiencing will determine what our practice will be.

For example, if you’re experiencing monkey mind—the mind that jumps from one thing to another, the mind that spins in thoughts—think if you know what would be a good practice?

- How about if you’re sleepy?
- What would be a good practice if you were caught in emotional upset?
- What if you were caught in self-judgment?
- What if nothing special is going on—what is practice in this situation?

We have to remember that at times practice can seem very confusing. Sitting in meditation, we may sometimes wonder, “What exactly *am* I doing here?” We might wonder if we’re supposed to be staying with our breathing, or maybe we should be labeling thoughts, or maybe we should be just trying to reside in the stillness. Then when strong emotions or deep beliefs arise,

*“What is practice in this situation?”*

we might again easily forget what we're supposed to do. Just think how often you forget to do the loving kindness practice when you get caught in self-judgment.

If, at any given moment, you were to pause and ask yourself, "What is practice right now?" a good percentage of the time the honest answer might be, "I don't know."

But this confusion doesn't arise because there are too many different practices to choose from—it's simply because we temporarily forget what we know. Half of what I do in daisan is to remind people of what they already know.

In fact, if we can remember to ask the additional question, "What am I leaving out?"—that will often point to exactly what we need to do. For example, we might be leaving out awareness of the breath, or the body, or the environment. We might be leaving out the labeling of our believed thoughts. Or the crucial perspective of seeing our difficulties as our path.

The main point, and the takeaway from this article, is to try to keep returning to beginner's mind. And the way to remind ourselves is by repeatedly asking these two crucial questions: "What is going on right now?" and "What is practice in this situation?" As well, the two sub-questions: "What am I adding?" and "What am I leaving out?" This is the way we keep beginner's mind alive.

*Ezra Bayda*

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