

PROLOGUE
The Beginner's Mind

" In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities,
but in the expert^s mind there are few."

People say that practicing zen is difficult,
but there is a misunderstanding as to why . It is not
difficult because it is hard to sit in the cross-legged
position, or to attain enlightenment. It is difficult
because it is hard to keep our mind pure and to keep
our practice pure in its original sense. The zen school
developed a great deal after it was established in
China, but at the same time, it became more and more
impure. This morning I don't want to talk about Chinese
zen or the history of zen. I am interested in helping
you keep your practice from becoming impure.

In Japan we have the phrase 'shoshin', which means
'beginner's mind'. The goal of our practice is always to
keep our beginner's mind. We recited the Brajña Paramita
Sutra only once this morning. I think we recited it very
well. What would happen to you if you recited it twice,
three times, four times, or more ? You might easily lose
your original attitude towards it. The same thing will
happen in your other zen practices. For awhile you will
keep your beginner's mind, but if you continue to practice
one, two, three years, or more, although you may improve
some, you are liable to lose the limitless meaning of the
original mind.

For zen students the most important thing is not to be dualistic. Our original mind includes everything within itself. Thus it is always rich and sufficient within itself. You should not lose your self-sufficient state of mind. This does not mean a closed mind, but actually an empty mind, a ready mind. If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind there are few.

If you discriminate too much, you limit yourself. If you are too demanding or too greedy, your mind is not rich and self-sufficient. If we lose our original self-satisfied mind, we will lose all our precepts. When your mind becomes demanding, when you long for something, you will end up violating our precepts: not to tell lies, not to steal, not to kill, not to be immoral, and so forth. If you keep your original mind, the precepts will keep themselves.

In the beginner's mind there is no thought, "I have attained something". All self-centered thoughts limit our vast mind. When we have no thought of achievement, no thought of self, we are a true beginner. Then we can really learn something. And the beginner's mind is the mind of compassion. When our mind is compassionate, it is boundless. Dogen Zengi, the founder of our school, always emphasized how important it is to resume to our boundless original mind. Then we are always true to ourselves, in sympathy with all beings, and we can practice truly.

So the most difficult thing is always to keep the beginner's mind. There is no need to have a deep understanding of zen. Even though you read much zen literature, you have to read each sentence with a fresh mind. You shouldn't say, "I know what zen is", or "I have attained enlightenment". This is the secret of such practices as the tea ceremony or flower arrangement, or Japanese singing and other arts. Always be a beginner. Be very very careful about this point. If you start to practice zazen, you will begin to appreciate your beginner's mind. It is the secret of zen practice.