

# Midwest Zen

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### ***Beginner's Mind***

"Beginner's Mind" is a term especially connected to Shunryu Suzuki Roshi because of his book, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. It's a term people casually use with the sense "everyone knows what *that* means." But I wonder.

Let's take a moment to consider what you think "Beginner's Mind" means. Can you articulate your relationship with it? Is it a principle by which you live? Is it something you hardly think about?

When Suzuki Roshi first saw the published copy of *Zen Mind Beginner's Mind*, he said: "It looks good . . . I didn't write it but it looks nice." It's true he didn't actually write this famous book. Suzuki Roshi arrived in San Francisco in 1959 to serve as priest for the Japanese Soto Zen community in San Francisco. While living alone in their large temple on Buchanan Street, he started sitting zazen in the morning and evening. Gradually people, curious about anything "Zen" (word spread quickly through the local art-scene grapevine) joined him and the sittings became more frequent and more formal. A few satellite groups also sprang up—in Mill Valley, Berkeley and Los Altos. Roshi would go there once or twice a week for zazen and to give talks. Eventually the woman who hosted the group in Los Altos, Trudy Dixon, began, with Roshi's permission, recording the lectures. After an extremely lengthy period of transcribing and editing, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* was published. People love it, but I'm not sure how many finish it because it is actually not so simple.

"Beginner's Mind"—the words—have become commonplace. Yet it's the fresh new breath—the "mind" of this phrase—that Suzuki-roshi so emphasized. Staying with this—first finding it and then how to bring ourselves again and again back to it, is at the heart of his legacy.

But it isn't easy. Not because IT isn't easy but because the cultural values with which it contends make it extremely challenging. I refer to setting goals, to winning, to achievement, to progress—these are all de-emphasized because the mind behind their direction is at cross-purposes with a beginner's mind.

Reb Anderson Roshi, a close disciple of Suzuki Roshi says that Roshi considered his main job as a Zen priest to encourage people to practice upright sitting. For him, Reb says, the most pure and direct way of sustaining the Buddha treasure was just to be fully himself in each moment. His way of protecting the Dharma treasure was to practice wholeheartedly with no gaining idea. And his way of protecting and sustaining the Sangha treasure (Buddha, Dharma & Sangha: the "Triple Treasures" of Buddhism) was what he called group practice—practicing together in harmony with others. When you consider that for Roshi, anyone being fully themselves means to be rooted in their fundamental Buddha-nature and that to do this one would have no gaining idea (because there is nothing to add to one's Buddha-nature)—THIS in itself would be Beginner's Mind.

When Roshi says *"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few,"* by "beginner" he means our fundamental selves, and from there being anything the situation requires. The phrase has a kind of innocence and lack of calculation or contrivance about it.

It's ironic. Suzuki-roshi loved Americans because "they don't know anything about Zen so they're receptive to the teachings." Yet at the same time Americans are steeped in gaining ideas. If you talk about upright sitting, for many people their first thought is "I don't have time," by which they mean "I can't afford not to accomplish something

even for 15 minutes." Most of Roshi's first students were artists who were operating differently already.

*"At first the effort you make is quite rough and impure, but by the power of practice the effort will become purer and purer. When your effort becomes pure, your body and mind become pure. This is the way we practice Zen."*

Let me give an example. When I was seventy-five my husband gave me a banjo for Christmas. My back was weak. My hands were stiff. There were many obstacles, but I just thought, "Well, I have always wanted to play the banjo. If I practice every day, every day I will have the joy of the banjo. Even one tune will be amazing.

Before I started playing, I could hardly believe that I, Gail, would ever be able to play the banjo. But day after day I just did the things from my lesson and now, a few years later, I actually *can* play a few tunes. And it *doesn't seem special*. It is just me, nothing special. Day after day it's just me figuring out how to get the strap over my head and the banjo so that it doesn't slip. There are so many considerations, if I let them, they could get annoying. But I just say "Nevermind. This is what it takes." In the end I get my tune, which at best doesn't sound too bad. Deep inside I am very satisfied.

Beginning at seventy-five has many advantages. I am not thinking, "Boy, if I practice really hard I could win a competition." I'm not thinking, "Too bad I can't play fast like her." Instead I am thinking, "Every day I can try as hard as I can and since I can't do better than that, I will have done my best."

In this way it becomes a "practice." Every morning for half an hour. Practice is about HOW—how to simply stay with how—making sure I have the half hour, that I have what I

need with me, that I know what to do during that time, that I'm alert.

It's easier to have a beginner's mind at seventy-five than at fifteen. At fifteen one is full of fantasies, notions, looking around, trying things on. At seventy-five you can just be yourself.

Anyway, playing the banjo is not really about playing the banjo. Playing the banjo is about sharpening the Mind-That-Plays-the-Banjo. Correct Mind creates correct playing, whether that be awkward, faulty, kindergarten-ish.

Correct Mind knows that there is nothing to know. This is important to understand. Knowledge (information) and Wisdom (spirit) are not the same. Playing the banjo is a Wisdom practice. You being YOU is the Wisdom practice of returning to the Source. Actually, when you think about it, it's the Source that plays the banjo.

Wisdom practice means NOT KNOWING. Suzuki Roshi calls it Beginner's Mind. If you want to do something fully you need the real you. The real you lives inside (behind or underneath) all of your knowing—touching the spot of JUST YOU—first recognizing it, then touching it and then *becoming* it in your stillness.

*"Our 'original mind' includes everything within itself. It is always rich and sufficient within itself."*

Roshi means that we have everything that we need to begin and continue with our practice.

*"The goal of practice is always to show up and to keep a beginner's mind."* It means that endlessly we stay with that fresh effort because boredom (laziness of mind) is always remediable.

The word "practice"—you can turn anything into a practice—means turning it into a relationship. In the case of my banjo it is a Self-relationship, with the banjo being a mirror. "Oh I don't really feel like practicing today," I may think but because it's a "practice" I get to see my mind when it is reluctant, but I practice anyway. If it were not a practice, I might just do what I feel like, risking the whole prospect which could easily fall away.

"Tell me about 'There is nothing to know' when it comes time to change the strings" you could rightfully ask. Because, while for big mind there is nothing to know, small mind needs lots of information. It's the way you hold the details, however, that makes the difference. The details are just details. Just as the waves of the sea are the "practice of the sea," so are the information and skills required to play an instrument—or to sit zazen.

*"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities but in the expert's mind there are few"* simply describes a way of holding these details.

## BIOGRAPHIES

**Yuan Changming** edits Poetry Pacific with Allen Yuan at [poetrypacific.blogspot.ca](http://poetrypacific.blogspot.ca). Credits include 12 Pushcart nominations, 15 chapbooks & appearances in Best of the Best Canadian Poetry (2008-17) and Poetry Daily.

**Sally Hess** was introduced to Buddhism at the Zen Community of New York in 1984. She received lay ordination from Dai-En Bennage Roshi in 1994 with the Dharma name Daisen.

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**Neil Schmitzer-Torbert** began his Zen practice in Minneapolis while studying neuroscience in graduate school. Today, he teaches psychology at Wabash College and shares reflections on practice and science at [neuralbuddhist.com](http://neuralbuddhist.com).

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**Joshua St. Claire** is a corporate controller from rural Pennsylvania. His haiku have appeared in several international journals and he believes that small poems can contain the universe.

**Lisa Summers** lives in rural Indiana and teaches in a women's prison. She enjoys capturing the world she wanders with photographs and in writing.

**Daniel Thomas's** second poetry book, *Leaving the Base Camp at Dawn*, was published in 2022. His first collection, *Deep Pockets*, won a 2018 Catholic Press Award. More info at [danielthomaspottery.com](http://danielthomaspottery.com).

**Jay Tuttle** finds the mix of art and science in photography very appealing. Making photographs that others enjoy are a great pleasure in his life. Enjoy more images at [jaytuttlephotography.com](http://jaytuttlephotography.com).

Poet **David Whyte** grew up with a strong, imaginative influence from his Irish mother among the hills and valleys of his father's Yorkshire. The author of eleven books of poetry and four books of prose, he holds a degree in Marine Zoology, and leads workshops and walking tours around the world.

