



*The Unitarian Church in Westport*

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## **SERMON TRANSCRIPT:**

### ***Beginners Mind***

*By the Rev. Dr. John Morehouse*

*Sunday, September 27, 2020*

I wasn't at all sure what I was doing there. It was cold and I was tired and hungry and sitting on this meditation mat in Zen retreat center in upstate New York. I was a new member of a Zen center in the West Village in NY, dragged there by my girlfriend at the time who I think really just enjoyed listening to the Zen master who she had a crush on. All and all not very Buddhist of her now that I think about it.

I had fallen in love with Buddhism, or at least Buddhism in the West Greenwich Village in New York City. I admired the simplicity of the faith. Its reliance on silence as a means to quieting the mind. The concept of emptiness, that all that really exists is energy in physical form, and most of all I yearned for Nirvana, enlightenment; a place where I could let go of my mountain of worry and pain.

I had just left the mid-west and my first marriage, lost my business, and was generally adrift in a sea of self-pity. So, when we wandered into this Zen center and I heard that one could leave the past behind and embrace a timeless release from suffering I was all in. I met with the Rōshi and he encouraged me. I considered taking the vow of three refuges: I seek refuge in the Buddha, I seek refuge in the Dharma or teachings, I seek refuge in the sangha or community. But before I could do that, the Rōshi told me, I would need to go on retreat, to deepen my practice and face any bad habits as he put it. As I look back on this time now, I think he saw a lost young man who still had a world to engage with.

In any case, there I was, in the cold meditation hall in upstate New York, trying desperately to focus on my breathing and to chase the demons of my life away. I had heard a talk the night before about the need for Beginners Mind, a mind not free of thoughts but not held by them either. I didn't have a clue how to do this but I wanted to know how, so much. As I would learn through the years, the very act of wanting is itself a hurdle to enlightenment.

After what seemed like an eternity, the meditation was over and it was time for me to have an interview with the Rōshi of the Retreat Center. I entered the grand room where the Rōshi sat. I sat before him and he stared at me for a long time. Then he finally said,

“why are you here?” I told him I was there to find enlightenment. He was silent for what seemed like an eternity. Perhaps he was figuring out how to answer such an arrogant question. “For most people Enlightenment takes a lifetime” he told me. “Really?” I said. “But who knows?” he said with a smile “Maybe you can do it in a few years. No? Maybe in a year? No. You can reach enlightenment in under seven days” What the Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield calls Buddhism’s money back guarantee. “Really?” I was thrilled, that was exactly how long I had left on this miserable retreat. At least I would get something out of all this sitting. “What do I have to do?” I asked. “Simple” said the Rōshi, “meditate for one day concentrating on nothing but your breath. Achieve that and you will have achieved enlightenment.” And with that he rang the bell. My session was over.

I almost ran back to the meditation hall, eager to begin right away. So, I sat “breath in, breath out” once, twice, three times, “I wonder what enlightenment will be like” I thought to myself. Oh woops, that was a thought, back to the breath., one, two, three, four, five, six “I wonder what’s for lunch”. Oh drat! Again, start again. (Thanks to Jack Kornfield for the inspiration of this remembrance.)

Needless to say, I gave up on enlightenment in the first five minutes. Not an uncommon occurrence I understand.

D.T. Suzuki was the first Zen master to bring pure land Buddhism to the West. He would speak often of how our minds are so attached to our emotions that we are forever trapped in cycle of fear and want. Especially now, right? Wave after wave of bad news keeps us in perpetual minds of worry, want and fear.

What is needed said Suzuki is for us to embrace beginners mind. **Beginners mind is a mind of curiosity and naming what we feel rather than thinking what we feel.** There are many minds Suzuki taught: there is doubters mind. Do you know doubters mind? Oh, I don’t think that will work or what if he is president for four more years. We were wrong before weren’t we. Or wanting mind. Do you know wanting mind? I just want that new car, house, job, relationship. Or I want the world to stop or people I love and admire not to die. Do you know this mind? I do. Or fearful mind. Do you know fearful? The world is ending or at least that is what it says on the news. What if I am dying. Or if I am dying what if this is all there is? Fearful mind is very strong. Every ache and pain reminds fearful mind that all of us must come to the end of our days.

The point is that each of these states of mind keep us from living in the now and feeling what is free to feel; this congregation, your family, your health. Beginners mind is the

renewal of our spirit, from moment to moment. Beginner's mind accepts the uncertainty of life without playing out future suffering in our mind.

My teacher Jack Kornfield puts it this way:

"The wisdom of uncertainty frees us from what Buddhist psychology calls the thicket of views and opinions. "Seeing misery in those who cling to views, a wise person should not adopt any of them. A wise person does not by opinions become arrogant...those who grasp after views and opinions wander about the world annoying people...You have so many opinions. And you suffer so much from them. Why not let them go?"

"Freedom from views is like a cleaning of the glass, a breath of fresh air....Listen to Rachel Carson, the great naturalist, as she evokes it: 'A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood. If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over all children, I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life.'

"When we are free from views, we are willing to learn. What we know for sure in this great turning universe is actually very limited. Seung Sahn, a Korean Zen master, tells us to value this 'don't know mind.' He would ask his students questions such as 'What is love? What is consciousness? Where did your life come from? What is going to happen tomorrow?' Each time, the students would answer, 'I don't know.' 'Good,' Seung Sahn replied. 'Keep this 'don't know mind.' It is an open mind, a clear mind.'"

<https://jackkornfield.com/beginners-mind/>

Can you keep a "don't know mind"? Some of you have been asking me what will we do if Biden doesn't win. What we are really saying is I am afraid and I want a plan if the worst happens. I get it. I am afraid as well but we have no control over that outcome and we don't know what will happen. I can tell you the world will not end. I suspect that we will overcome this present darkness with a light we all have. But for now, I don't know and I find a still point in my life with that.

I am reminded of what T.S. Elliot wrote in his poem "Burnt Norton:"

"At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,

Where past and future are gathered.  
 Neither movement from nor towards,  
 Neither ascent nor decline.  
 Except for the point, the still point,  
 There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.  
 I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where.  
 And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.  
 The inner freedom from the practical desire,  
 The release from action and suffering, release from the inner  
 And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded  
 By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving,  
 Burning without motion, concentration  
 Without elimination, both a new world  
 And the old made explicit, understood  
 In the completion of its partial ecstasy,  
 The resolution of its partial horror.  
 Yet the enchainment of past and future  
 Woven in the weakness of the changing body,  
 Protects mankind from heaven and damnation  
 Which flesh cannot endure.  
 Time past and time future  
 Allow but a little consciousness.  
 To be conscious is not to be in time."

When doubting mind comes to roost, when wanting mind seems to stay, when fearful  
 mind blocks out all hope, this is when we need the renewal that comes from beginner's  
 mind.

How do we find beginners mind?

The Buddha taught that beginners mind is found by being mindful of the pain, worry and  
 suffering around us. In meditation he taught to sit still and when any thought positive or  
 negative came and started to take over your mind, say to it, "oh there you are fear my old  
 friend, I know you, come have a seat." By knowing and naming the thought and emotion  
 we objective it away from who we are. We are not fear. We are not worry. We are not  
 want. But we are also not joy, we are not ecstasy we are not what is passing through us.  
 We are an empty vessel whose walls are made strong by our character, by the passing  
 through of joy, want, fear, and love. We are the still point. Turn off the news. Say hello to  
 your neighbor and wait for the call to action. It will come.

Needless to say, I left the retreat center without being enlightened. Really, I left organized Buddhism as well although I retain much of the Buddha's teaching and wisdom. I have learned how to sit without it hurting, most days.

As we brace ourselves for these dark days ahead, I suggest we cultivate a beginner's mind, we can remember. Renewal is ours to hold in the midst of so much struggle. In fact, as T.S. Elliot said in the conclusion of his poem:

“Desire itself is movement  
Not in itself desirable;  
Love is itself unmoving,  
Only the cause and end of movement,  
Timeless, and undesiring  
Except in the aspect of time  
Caught in the form of limitation  
Between un-being and being.  
Sudden in a shaft of sunlight  
Even while the dust moves  
There rises the hidden laughter  
Of children in the foliage  
Quick now, here, now, always —  
Ridiculous the waste sad time  
Stretching before and after.”