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Beginning Something Anew 1/1/2012

In the beginning, all things are hopeful. We prepare ourselves to start fresh. Though we may be intent on the possibilities of the journey ahead, all things are contained in the first moment: faith, optimism, determination, and innocence. Today, as the 7th day of Kwanza, the day is called Imani, or faith.

In order to start, we must make a decision to daily self cultivation. We must make a determination to make a strong connection to our inner selves. Outside matters are present in our lives. These matters come into being without our efforts. We negotiate life, and all of life's trials. By doing so, we transform ourselves and by paying attention to our inner cultivation, we are able to experience life as deep spiritual lessons.

If we have devotion, faith and commitment to our path, our determination will naturally gain momentum. As we gain momentum, fewer and fewer obstructions will come before us. This is not to say that life will, in itself, be easier. **This is to say that our practice will change our experience of the obstructions of life. Our path will become less overwhelming and tangled, for no matter what life brings us, we have made a commitment and will be not deterred from our practice.**

Sounds easy? Obstacles arise: feelings like disappointment, embarrassment, irritation, resentment, anger, jealousy, fatigue, fear, shame and even joy. There are events and people in our lives who trigger unresolved issues. We don't need to go looking for these events and feelings, they find us! Can we lean into them? Can we not run like crazy, but sit on the cushion and meet them? Can we get to know these feelings and thoughts without judgment? If we can do this, through meditation, we are able to see more clearly what's going on with our thoughts and emotions. We can learn to live with them, to make peace with them or to just let them go. We can see when we shut down, and when we open our minds. Like muddy water that is cleared when still, our minds will clear when we take the posture of stillness.

As we practice, we become aware that a single moment is the same as a new year. To enjoy a single moment, to enjoy a new year, we must open our minds.

Perhaps this is what Suzuki Roshi means when he talks about Beginner's Mind.

He states: "*In the beginner's mind, there are many possibilities*"

Just like in the New Year, there are many possibilities. The skill of our practice is to keep beginner's mind. You can sit in meditation once, twice or many times. Over time, our practice can become stale, boring. Because we do it many times, we think we know how to do it. We think we know what each meditation session will be like. **So, how do we maintain beginner's mind?**

To have a beginners mind, we must **have an empty mind**. This means it is ready for anything. This means our mind is not predicting, expecting, and going somewhere else. This means the mind is present and open to the moment, open to anything. The opposite way to say this is that the mind is not closed. Self centered thoughts may arise like "I am good at this", or "I am bad at this", or "I wish that ache would go away". As soon as we think this, the mind is not present, it is off somewhere else. When we have no thoughts of achievement, no thoughts of ourselves, then we have true beginner's mind.

What helps us to hold beginner's mind? Correct posture is crucial. Keep your spine straight. Ears and shoulders should be on one line. Relax your shoulders and push up the top of your head towards the ceiling. Some find the image of hanging from the sky by a thread at the top of the head helpful. Pull your chin in.

If your chin is up you are likely to be off in a dream and have no strength in your sitting. If your head is slumped down, you will fall asleep. To gain strength in your posture, push your diaphragm towards your lower abdomen (Dantien). Soften the solar-plexus. This helps you to maintain balance both mentally and physically.

You should not be tilted sideways, backwards or forwards. You should be sitting straight up. This posture is not just form or breathing. This posture is the essence of practice. Suzuki Roshi states that sitting in this way is the perfect expression of your Buddha nature. When we went to a retreat with Thich Nhat Hahn, he told the children, "Imagine you are a mountain, sitting solidly".

Do not think that this posture will get you something else. This posture is not just a means of attaining the right state of mind. To take this posture itself is the nature of practice. To take this posture you already have the right state of mind.

If you are trying to create the right state of mind, then your mind will shut down. Then, your mind is starting to wander somewhere else. "If only I could do this." "If only I could have that." "If only I weren't so antsy."

Next, **pay attention to everything in the moment.** Pay attention to your breath, your spine, watch the thoughts come and go, notice the smell, sounds, light of the world. *Breathe in, breathe out. Rest in the world.* How do we rest when there are aches and pains? *Notice and let go, notice and let go, study and let go!* It is important to realize that this is an embodied practice. We are in our physical body, we must own our body. When you slump you lose yourself. Your mind will be wandering about. Anyone who has meditated for even 5 minutes knows that it is not easy to sit, solid as a mountain. Yet, you must exist right here and now. You do exist here and now. There is nothing to change. Without awareness we will subtly try to change the world and ourselves. When you find yourself doing this, just come back to awareness, to your own body. Just bring your mind back to the present, check your posture. Breathe in, breathe out.

Our mind and body is practice itself. How we sit, how we attend to thoughts, feelings, the world around us. We live in our body, we are our body. The Buddha recognized that enlightenment is not a special state of mind. The State of mind when you sit correctly in meditation is enlightenment itself.

As we practice, we become aware that a single moment is the same as a new year. Each moment is fresh, empty, and filled with possibility.

Happy new breath, happy new moment, happy new year.

(Adapted from Suzuki Roshi, Pema Chodron and Deng Meng Dao)