

# Cultivating Beginner's Mind

Yvonne Rand offers two practices for bringing us into the Buddha space of Beginner's Mind.

By Yvonne Rand  
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I want to talk about practices that are conducive to cultivating Beginner's Mind—the mind fresh and awake to many possibilities. This mind is different from the mind we often bring to habitual activities or habitual ways of thinking or responding. How can I be a beginner in each moment, even in those situations where I am doing something that I have done many times before?

I have found the practice of the half-smile conducive to cultivating Beginner's Mind, as well as the practice of taking on several points of view in a particular situation. These are the two practices I want to consider here.

Like many other practices, the practice of the half-smile—for the space of three breaths—can bring us to the experience of what I call “Buddha space.” By this I mean the space I know from sitting every day over a long period of time. It is that space that is open to the most possibilities and to seeing most widely. Often, having a moment of “Buddha space” is enough to recall me to a wider mind than I normally have as I race around through the course of the day.

The practice of the half-smile has nothing to do with feeling like smiling. For those of you who have not done this practice before, you can think of it as “mouth yoga.” Just lift the corners of your mouth slightly—not a full smile or a grin—for the space of three full breaths. Let your attention be on the sensation of slightly lifted corners of the mouth and then with the three breaths.

This is a practice you can do when you first wake up in the morning. If you already do some daily meditation practice, the half-smile is a practice you can do when you first begin your regular meditation. When I first began doing the half-smile, I did it whenever I found myself waiting: standing in the checkout line at the grocery store, on hold on the telephone, waiting for an appointment in the doctor's office.

I found that if I had some signal to remind me to do the half-smile when I first woke up, I could readily remember to do it. If not, I would think of it sometime around noon—or three days later. So I took a picture of Suzuki Roshi laughing and I put the picture by the side of the bed. Now, when I wake in the morning, it is usually the first thing I see. And the agreement that I made with myself was that whenever I see that picture I will stop and do the half-smile for three breaths. After a month or so, it occurred to me to do the practice also when I notice some feeling of anger or anxiety or tension arising; the half-smile is, in fact, traditionally used as an antidote to negative states of mind.

Most of all I find that the half-smile is a practice that brings me a sense of spaciousness, and in that spaciousness I notice more than when I am feeling crowded by my pace or my activity, or by the expectations I hold for myself.

Another practice I would like to consider is that of taking on different points of view. I think that I can suggest this practice best by telling you some stories that illustrate it.

When you came to this meditation hall this morning, you came into the outer hall through one of the two sliding doors. If the doors are not closed on a cold day, and if the stove in the back area is lit, all the heat from the stove escapes through those doors. If both doors are left open, a wind tunnel forms and a gale blows through. There has been a colloquy for some time about what we can do to get each of us to remember to close the doors. We have all kinds of discussions about rules and punishments.

Recently, people who live in the back area of the building were standing in a circle around the stove warming themselves and fussing together about this problem. In the middle of the discussion, Sierra, the golden retriever who lives here at Green Gulch, came wagging in. She pushed

open the sliding door and joined the group. Suddenly everyone realized that it was Sierra who enters in the middle of the night, opening and not closing the door. She comes in to be warm and dry and near her friends. Suddenly there was a kind of opening about this problem with the unclosed doors. There may even have been some irritation with Sierra, but nothing like the irritation which some of us had felt toward each other.

Our minds are tricky. What happens in a situation where I am certain that Mary or Joe is the one who has left the door open? And what happens, by contrast, when I imagine that it is sweet old Sierra the dog, coming in from the cold and rain? A kind of generosity may arise in my mind.

Thich Nhat Hanh wrote a poem called "Please Call Me By My True Names." There is one verse of the poem that, one day, under trying circumstances, leapt off the wall where I had hung the poem. This verse expresses in another way the practice of taking on more than one point of view:

I am the twelve-year-old girl refugee on a  
Small boat who throws herself into the ocean  
After being raped by a sea pirate  
And I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable  
Of seeing and loving.

My tendency is to take the point of view of the twelve-year-old girl. It is much more difficult for me to be the sea pirate.

When I was in India recently, I had an experience with a rickshaw driver. I decided that I wanted to spend my last day at the memorial site for Gandhi, in old Delhi. I stayed until it was dusk and then discovered that there were no taxis. I had no idea how I would get back to my guesthouse. After standing and waiting for a motor taxi for a long time, it became clear to me that I would ride in a bicycle rickshaw or nothing. I was frightened, but I decided to take my chances.

The previous evening, I had stayed up rather late talking to the bookkeeper at the YWCA guesthouse. He was Indian and he wanted to know how I liked India. We talked about some of my encounters with

taxi drivers, because they had sometimes been unpleasant. He talked to me about the life of a taxi driver. In all instances, he said, these drivers have expenses they have to meet—for example, payments to the owner of the vehicle—whether they get enough fares in a day or not. He helped me to see the perspective of a taxi driver in Delhi, who saw me as a Westerner, a lone woman; I became fair game. And if I was unaware enough to pay ten times the usual fare, it was all right.

I had, up to the time of this conversation, felt angry at taxi drivers who would try to charge me three or five or ten times the usual fare. The conversation came up for me that evening as I was sitting in the bicycle rickshaw feeling uncomfortable being the passenger, while a young, apparently healthy but certainly thin young man peddled us along. I felt frightened, but I realized also that I might be in the rickshaw at most for an hour. The driver was spending long hours every day, perhaps for his lifetime, in this situation, wending his way among trucks and buses and cars.

When the driver and I discussed how much he wanted, and how much I wanted to pay, I could enter into a discussion with a stance from which we could come to some meeting point and some respect for each other, and then continue on our respective ways.

What I am suggesting is that when you find yourself in a situation, especially a situation which you will be in for a while, take on the point of view of another being in that situation. If you are working in the garden taking care of tender new plants that snails love, you might be a snail. A friend recently described doing hospice work, sitting in a hospital room with someone who is sick, with the family and friends there, and a television set turned on but with no one watching it. She sometimes takes on the point of view of the television set. And she can see all these people, all these things happening. And she can be there, quietly, with no one noticing her.

Please try these practices and see what happens.

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