

The Quest4Life Podcast Show Notes:

Season #3, Episode #28: A Beginner's Mind

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Think back on the moment you first learned to ride a bike or climbed a tree or when you learned to drive a car for the first time. As you learned how to do each of those things, you possessed *a beginner's mind*.

You found a sense of awe and adventure in branching out and toward new experiences that, upon reflection, changes your perspective and worldview.

Unfortunately, there comes a time in life, most often during childhood, where novelty wears off and we become subject to confinement. This is confinement in the sense that we lose our sense of adventure in learning new things because, to fit into society, we must conform to specific rules.

This is evident when we put children in rows and force them to listen to teachers that talk at them all day about topics adults decided were necessary to have a productive life, to be a productive member of society.

Now, what I'm not saying is that education isn't critical. It's essential. I'm also not asserting that things like institutions, rules, and laws aren't necessary. They are, if for no other reason that institutions, rules, and laws help govern functional, cooperative societies.

What I am suggesting, however, is that such conformity inhibits a person's natural curiosity to seek out things that can prove transformative to their lives.

And to level-up your mindset to achieve peak performance despite the institutions, rules, and laws that, in large part, govern how you show up and behave in the world, developing a beginner's mind is foundational.

It's fundamental to living a life filled with awe, wonder, and joy.

What follows are ways to begin cultivating a beginner's mind...

A Beginner's Mind

The term "beginner's mind" is translated from the original word, Shoshin, which is a word that comes from Zen Buddhism, and means that you look at every situation you find yourself in as if it's the first time you're seeing or experiencing it.

It is a teaching that helps people remedy the habits that reinforce self-limiting beliefs and get back to the mindset we had as children. Another way of stating this is that a beginner doesn't

have any expectations for how things will turn out, no pre- conceived notions or past experiences that limit their view of a given situation.

Juxtapose this with having a curiosity towards learning about new and different things opens possibilities and potentialities versus deferring to the cynicism and jadedness of past conditioning or programming. This approach to life contradicts the notion of expertise, which is an attitude people hold that they know enough about something to achieve what they need to do.

People that are highly deferential to “the expert” or becoming “the expert” make assumptions and tend not to ask questions before making assessments or decisions. They hold the belief, however shortsightedly, that there is one correct solution, one correct answer to a given situation or problem and that any deviation is “wrong.”

If you think about it, it’s an extraordinarily narrow point of view and holding such a perspective limits you from finding alternative or even better solutions.

Conversely, when you possess a beginner’s mind, you look beyond the either-or nature of right and wrong and open yourself up to learn new things. You shift your mindset away from past knowledge, experience, and pre- conceptions that can cloud your judgment. You move from a life that is stale and routine toward approaching problems and situations with more creativity and fresher perspectives.

Now, there are some quick-hitting practices you can employ right away to cultivate a beginner’s mind, as outlined by Mary Jaksch of Goodlife Zen. They include:

1. Take one step at a time
2. Fall down 7 times, get up 8
3. Use the “don’t know mind” and don’t pre-judge
4. Live without shoulds
5. Make use of experience, but keep an open mind on how to apply it to each new circumstance
6. Let go of being an expert
7. Experience the moment fully
8. Disregard common sense
9. Discard fear or failure
10. Use the spirit of inquiry; and
11. Focus on questions, not answers

Others from Karson McGinley of Chopra.com include:

1. Yes, No, Maybe
2. Pay attention to the foundation
3. Emulate the wonder of children
4. Beware of storytelling
5. Notice when you experience expectations; and
6. Treat every day like it’s your birthday

Both lists are credible starting points and serve as terrific reminders or mantras you can tell yourself throughout the day.

5 Specific Ways to Cultivate Shoshin (A Beginner's Mind)

#1: Ignore the Stories We Tell Ourselves

Whether we like it or not, we create stories or narratives about our past experiences (Season #2, Episode #19 – “The Stories We Tell Ourselves”). And, if we tell those stories to ourselves enough, they become truth. It should be noted, however, that your mind plays tricks on you even when the stories you tell yourself are designed to make sense of things. These stories help provide reasons why things happen, which can lead to faulty conclusions.

#2: Take Inspiration from Children

For children, almost everything is new and, as previously mentioned, they approach situations with wonder and amazement. Because children don't have a repository of past experiences from which to draw and that, by extension, they don't have any preconceived notions, the next situation is tabula rosa or blank slate.

For you, this could take the form of asking questions like, “What is this?” Or “Why is it this way?” Or “How does this work?” Asking any or all these questions allow you to learn about topics you may have believe you are already an expert in.

Worst case scenario is that you reaffirm what you already knew or thought you knew while having an open mind throughout the process.

#3: Slow Down

As you've undoubtedly heard previously on TQ4LP, you have ~60,000-70,000 thoughts per day, 95% of which are subconscious, which is to say that you spend 95% of your life on autopilot (Season #3, Episode #19 – “Reacting vs. Responding”). Now, this is a very good thing considering that we need to make quick decisions to function in the world.

And when we know how to do something, when we habituate behaviors, we run on autopilot. The danger is that running on autopilot disallows you from being fully aware of what you're doing and experiencing. Slowing down, however, forces you to act with intention and live presently in every situation.

Remember that a beginner's mind is about discovery rather than simply going through the motions.

#4: Remove the Word “Should” from Your Vocabulary

When you live with “should” and “shouldn’t” in your vocabulary, you’re inviting your preconceived notions and expectations into the circumstance of your life because saying something should or shouldn’t happen ties the thought to a preconceived or expected outcome.

And, of course, when you do that, you will be met with disappointment quite often, which creates a negative feedback loop for every next time your preconceptions or expectations aren’t met.

A better way is letting each situation unfold in the manner it unfolds so you can be surprised by the outcome. This is the Taoist perspective of flowing with the perfection of life.

#5: Tame Your Ego

I’ve often said that “The ego is the devil’s playground.”

This is never more evident than when we have our ego tied to our expertise and the subsequent recognition that comes with such expertise. Being rewarded for identifying with our ego feels good and it becomes like any other addiction. You need to chase “the high” of the next time your ego is validated...and the cycle persists.

Possessing a beginner’s mind, however, is antithetical to having your ego stroked, as the goal is almost never to be right but rather the goal is learning from new experiences and the joy that comes from that learning. Thus, letting go of the need to be right or letting go of the need to have your ego validated may be the most important thing you can do to learn something new and improve yourself.

Final Thoughts

Give some thought to recent situations where you’ve taken the position of expert, haven’t welcome new information, and/or had expectations for how you and others should act.

How did those situations play out?

It’s likely they played out exactly how you had preconceived them, which is to say you limited your ability to be surprised and to learn something new.

Now, give some thought to the times in your recent past when you possessed a beginner’s mind.

How much more did you learn?

How surprised were you by what you learned?

How much more enjoyable was the situation because you left your bias and expectations at the door?

It's likely you experienced by having a beginner's mind added more productive value to your life than living by and through your preconceptions and expectations.

Imagine you can feel this way in every situation because YOU CAN!

And if you can add more productive value to your life and live more openly with more joy, why wouldn't you do it?

As usual, it's food for thought, Fellow Questers.

