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A Beginner's Mind

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Japan is a fabulous country, one full of contrasts, where traditional and modern meet and strike a balance.

Each visitor formulates his or her own picture of Japan, from the elegant formality of Japanese manners and the unexpected rural festivals to the hustle and bustle of street markets, the sanitized shopping malls, the extreme order that characterizes Tokyo's underground...

When I arrived in Tokyo, everything caught my attention. Japan is very different from what we are used to. In a way, you feel like a child again. Suddenly your mind becomes fresh and awake, discovering things again because everything is new.

Japanese people are very polite and there is a sense of calm in places we are not used to finding calm in: restaurants, the underground, etc.

Japanese people honor their history and follow traditions. Almost everywhere there are shrines, temples, *torii*, and pagodas, where people pray and ask for luck. At the same time they enjoy being on the cutting edge of modernity and technology. They have incredible mobile phones, impressive robots, gigantic screens in the streets, etc.

After a few days in Tokyo, we left for Kyoto, the old imperial capital.

Kyoto is a classical Japanese city, much smaller than Tokyo and full of spectacular Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. People are even nicer there than in Tokyo, and you don't feel in such a rush.

The temples struck me as very spiritual places. Usually flanking the entrances outside are images of guardians or protectors. Inside are several Buddha images. It's quite easy to catch the monks in prayer as you visit any of the Zen Buddhist temples.

There is a very interesting concept in Zen called "Beginner's Mind." It refers to a beginner's state of mind. A beginner is free of the habits of the expert and is ready to accept, doubt, and discover. Beginners are open to all possibilities. A beginner's mind is free of expectations and preconceptions, prejudices and judgments. This concept was formulated by the Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki.

It is a good practice to maintain a beginner's mind in everyday life and to face new challenges as true "beginners." This way, we can free ourselves of the burden of fear of failure or of making mistakes.

Be a beginner again!

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