Imagine sitting down in front of a mirror. Your face automatically appears. There is no effort required; the mirror is doing all the work. You can’t do it right or wrong. The Zen Buddhist practice of “just sitting” is like that. When we sit, our mind automatically begins to display itself to us. Our practice is to observe and experience what appears moment after moment. Of course, just as when we look in a real mirror, things don’t stay that simple for long.

We notice how our faces or our bodies look in the mirror, and we immediately have an emotional reaction and form judgments about what we see. Rainer Maria Rilke wrote that Paul Cezanne was capable of painting a self-portrait with utter objectivity, of looking at his own face with no more reaction than “a dog which sees itself in a mirror and thinks, ‘there is another dog.’” For the rest of us, it’s not so easy to simply observe who we are. Looking in the mirror, we are tempted to use it as a makeup mirror to touch up the parts of our self-image we don’t like.

Our minds are never what we want them to be. That’s part of why we sit in the first place. We are uncomfortable with ourselves as we are. The greatest dualism we face is the split between
who we are and who we think we ought to be. Sometimes that gap fuels our aspiration to follow Buddhist teachings, sometimes it simply fuels our self-hatred, and all too often we confuse these two notions of self entirely.

Just sitting means sitting still with all of the aspects of ourselves that we came to Buddhist practice in order to avoid or change - our restlessness, our anxiety, our fear, our anger, our wandering minds. Our practice is to just watch, to just feel. We watch our minds. Minds think. There’s no problem with that; minds just do what they do. Ordinarily we get caught up in the content of our thoughts, but when we just sit, we observe ourselves just thinking. Our body’s most basic activity is breathing: No matter what else is going on, we are breathing. We sit and breathe, and we feel the sensation of our breath in our bodies. Often there is tension or even pain somewhere in our bodies as well. We sit and feel that too and keep breathing. Whatever thoughts come, come. Whatever feelings come, come. We are not sitting there to fight off our thoughts or try to make ourselves stop thinking.

When we sit, we realize how unwilling we are to leave anything about ourselves alone. We turn our lives into one endless self-improvement project. All too often what we call meditation or spirituality is simply incorporated into our obsession with self-criticism and self-improvement. I’ve encountered many students who have attempted to use meditation to
perform a spiritual lobotomy on themselves - trying to excise, once and for all, their anger, their fear, their sexuality. We have to sit with our resistance to feeling whole, to feeling all those painful and messy parts of ourselves.

Just sitting means just that. That “just” endlessly goes against the grain of our need to fix, transform, and improve ourselves. The paradox of our practice is that the most effective way of transformation is to leave ourselves alone. The more we let everything be just what it is, the more we relax into an open, attentive awareness of one moment after another. Just sitting leaves everything just as it is.