

EMPOWERING QUESTIONS

By Laoshi Laurince D. McElroy

As we contemplate the past and consider the future, we should seek to do so as well-informed as we can. One of the best ways to find the lessons that life has afforded us is to question ourselves. Only when we honestly examine ourselves, can we hope to embrace the Hindu proverb, "The true measure of an individual is not whether one is superior to others, but whether one is superior to one's previous self." Always looking for new tools to add to my life's toolbox, I was happy when I stumbled upon four questions that I feel are truly empowering.

These questions came into my life years ago from one of my business networking associates, Leslie Malin. These days she runs a personal coaching business Alchemy of Aging. When she presented the questions, she credited author of *The Four-Fold Way*, Angeles Arrien. The questions are:

- What have you learned?
- What has softened you?
- What has opened you?
- What has deepened you?
- Where have you been totally challenged, stressed, and / or surprised?

Taking a lesson from Kwai Chang Caine, we should seek first to understand the questions. Please keep in mind that the time-frame for personal inquiry needs to have a beginning and an end. It could be yearly, monthly, weekly, daily, or — more effectively — each of these demarcations. Think of the information you gather if you seek to answer these questions at the close of each day, each week, each month, and each year.

What Have You Learned?

I recently ran across a quote that I found bracing. It came from a speech given by Francesco Garri Garripoli at the 2009 National Qigong Association ("Qigong and the Dreamtime" in *The Empty Vessel*, Fall 2009, 21-5), "Anything worth mastering is most likely not worth learning."

Learning should be an ongoing process. Our knowledge cup should never become full. Another lesson from Caine is when he tells someone sharing the storyline with him that he stays alive two ways: he breathes; he learns.

Whatever it is that we learn, we can further the lesson by examining what it is we did not know and the path that we had to take to eliminate the personal ignorance. This examination can also open the door to understanding what new ignorances might be brought to the surface because of our new knowledge or ability.

What Has Softened You?

As we explore what has softened us, we need to consider that sometimes being softened is a good thing and sometimes being softened is a bad thing. Most would agree that softening a sharp tongue is usually a positive and that softening a commitment to a personal principle is not.

We all have experiences that take the edge off of some aspect of our personality and / or approach to life. As we examine those experiences, we need to first determine if this softening has taken away an edge that cuts us and others or if it has taken away an edge needed to cut through the various challenges that we face as we walk the path of our own personal journey.

When we identify how we have been softened, we can begin to take the steps to either further it or reverse the process. Perhaps a sub-question here is: Am I soft enough; or, am I too soft?



(Art by David C. Chen)

What Has Opened You?

Growth doesn't come from closing, it comes from opening. The more open we become, the more possibilities can unfold for us. There is, of course, risk in being open. There's a quote in my collection from an unknown source: "The rewards of the journey far outweigh the risk of leaving the harbor."

We should take the time to review what aspects of our journey have resulted in helping us cast off and set our sails. Was it something we read, witnessed, or watched? Perhaps it was something someone has said to us or done for us. When we understand what has opened us and how it succeeded in doing so, we can open ourselves to more.

At the same time we contemplate how we have opened, we may see more clearly where we are still closed. As you have probably heard me say on the mat, "Awareness is curative."

What Has Deepened You?

How many of us have heard something along the lines of "What you have to do is dig down deep"? Our task in addressing this question is to take stock in what has helped us create the depth to have something into which we can dig.

Perhaps you experienced a moment that took you to a level of creativity that you didn't think was in you. Perhaps there was a moment that you put the pieces of a mental puzzle together that you thought was beyond you. Perhaps it was those two additional reps in a new exercise regimen. Once we touch the depth, it's easier to find it again and again and to take actually take it deeper.

Where Have You Been Totally Challenged, Stressed, and / or Surprised?

This question could easily be replaced with the first. Moments that most would consider negative should actually be viewed simply as our teachers. Being challenged, stressed and / or surprised can bring our strengths to the surface and reveal where we need some improvement.

It may be painful to perform a post-mortem on moments we'd really like to forget. The benefits of such an examination can help us find the steps to remove or avoid the same type of roadblocks to our success in the future.

So the question is now: Are you brave enough to ask the tough questions and embrace whatever the answers reveal to make your next steps a little easier?

