

Empty Your Cup

By Laoshi Laurince McElroy

“Empty your cup.” I’m guessing you’ve heard the phrase before now. It’s a standard in philosophy and the martial arts.

Not only is it a theme in conversations that can be heard repeated on the mat at the studio or in the room at a public class, but it is also a reference that can be heard in a number of movies from martial arts films to some that might surprise you. Although one might expect to hear “empty your cup” in a movie like *Forbidden Kingdom*, it has also made appearances in movies like *Avatar* and *2012*.

The parable that has inspired all this has been told in the studio, at various public classes, and through a number of speaking engagements. It has even recently graced the pages of the Water Tiger newsletter (Volume 11, Number 2). Although not the only place published, it can be found as the first installment in Nyogen Senzaki’s *101 Zen Stories*. Needless to say, it’s also been told by other instructors in other programs.

Even though it is quite obvious the parable and references to it proliferate, it is not so obvious as to whether or not everyone truly understands its meaning and successfully puts the words into their actions. Although I’m sure one can find a plethora of essays, articles, blog posts, Facebook threads, etc., addressing just these things, I am putting fingers to keyboard and adding my words to those that already exist.

Before I dive into the details, here’s my paraphrased version of the parable:

A student comes to a teacher to learn. The teacher performs a tea ceremony and overfills the student’s cup. When pressed for an explanation of this action, the teacher says, “How can you learn from me if your cup is already full?”

To start from a different perspective — in case someone thinks they absolutely understand everything this parable has to offer — let’s talk about the cup first.

The teacher is, of course, correct that a cup must be empty before it can be filled. But, teacher and student must first understand that the cup itself has already been formed. We are a sum of all that we have experienced. In other words, what is taught will take on the shape of what has come before. In other words, we might be successful in emptying the cup, but the cup will still be the cup. An example might be found in one of my own recent experiences. I attended an open house at an associate’s school. Their lineage is Wu-style. Regardless of how open I was to shedding my own Yang-style skin and moving as the instructor moved, I can tell you without hesitation that my Yang-style flavored my playing of her Wu-style. At the same event, I was introduced to a T’ai Chi fan form. The instructor admitted to have learned the form from a Yang-style instructor, yet the form through which she led us had an undeniable taste of Wu.

The perspective that the cup itself will maintain its form might serve as an explanation as to why there are so many differences within even a single style of T’ai Chi. If someone comes to T’ai Chi from Bagua, their T’ai Chi cannot help but to be flavored by Bagua. If someone comes to T’ai Chi from the Shaolin arts, their T’ai Chi cannot help but be flavored by Shaolin. If someone comes to T’ai Chi from Shotokan — well, you get my point.

Once we understand the cup is the cup, we can begin to address the issue of softening its influence. As they say in therapy: Awareness is curative. The question that opens us to this process isn’t as tough as one might think: Is what I am doing, saying, thinking, feeling, etc., coming from the present experience or from the principles of _____?

This step is not possible as long as the cup remains full.

The first step in emptying our cup is to let go of expectation. Sometimes that can actually be harder than letting go of all the experience garnered over years spent studying with a different instructor. We all tend



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to have some sort of expectation in regard to the unfolding of any experience. We may think something will be hard, or easy. We may believe that the teacher will be gentle, or harsh. We may hope we will feel better immediately. We may be doubtful of the long list of health benefits we have heard or read. We may expect that it's natural to approach what we are doing with a cup full of expectations. However, it is only with no expectation that we can truly be open to fully experience what is before us at this time in this place.

Once we've let go of our expectations, we can begin to empty our cup of the other things that can get in our way.

One of the best indicators of such a roadblock is when we find ourselves thinking or saying something that begins with a phrase along the lines of: "I'd never do ...". When we close to the door to something, the possibility of discovering a new level of understanding is also shut to us. This might take the form of someone who struggles against taking a wide step because that "isn't the way I walk" or it might be someone who hesitates stepping forward into a block because that "goes against all my training".

Avoiding the pitfalls of such an overflowing cup can be easier than one might think. It actually begins with many of the things we hear on the mat and in the room for different reasons. It begins by "letting go" — allowing your previous experience to be put on the shelf or under your chair with your shoes. It begins by "being in the present moment" — it is not about what has come before or what may come next, it is about what is happening right now at this time and in this place. It begins by "not thinking" — planning, analyzing, judging, etc., are all things that get in the way of experiencing the flow of the moment and feeling the expansions and contractions of the energy.

As the cup tilts and begins to drain, it will become easier to allow the flow to continue and the cup to fully empty. Once you embrace the experience of a truly empty cup, you find you won't need to empty it again — it becomes bottomless.

