

Leaving the Outside Outside

By Laoshi Laurince McElroy

One of my favorite moments in David Mamet's film *Redbelt* is this exchange between the film's protagonist, Mike, and someone who has turned to him for help:

Mike: "The first step is the hardest."

Laura: "And what is the first step?"

Mike: "To leave the outside outside."

The world conspires against us. Our lives conspire against us. The sidewalk and street traffic conspire against us. The music blaring from the passing cars conspires against us.

No.

The only conspiracy is the one that is led by your own mind.

Period.

As with many aspects of our lives and the arts that we play, there are many different ways to address this challenge. None are really complicated, but I will not argue that any are easy.

The first might use the threshold to the studio itself. In various laboratories, they have various types of decontamination procedures. One might be that workers pass through a gateway that issues forth some mixture of the necessary chemicals and / or gases that cleanse the worker of all that would infect the lab. I'd ask you to think of the threshold of the studio as such a gateway. Entering the studio cleanses you of whatever baggage you may be carrying from all that has gone before and all that is on your mind about the future.



Stepping through the threshold of the studio cleanses you of whatever baggage you may be carrying from all that has gone before and all that is on your mind about the future.

If you view your life as so complicated that you need several treatments, I'd ask you to consider your commute to the studio and mentally mark places on your route that provide such treatments. Be specific in your choices, e.g., intersections, storefronts, landmarks, etc. As you drive by each, exhale and leave something behind — you can always pick it up on your way home. It will wait. You will be lighter without it.

Our bows, our shrine, and even the clothes we wear can contribute to our success in lightening our load and leaving the outside outside. In 2004, I addressed rituals in an essay that was published in the March newsletter and is [now available on the Archive page of our website](#).

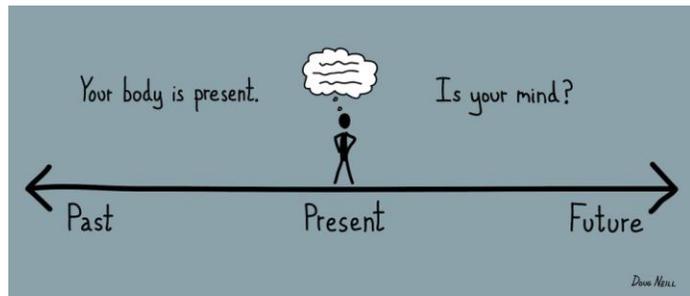
We, of course, bow to honor the place of learning, those that have come before, and the shared experience. But, the bows also create bookends for our time on the mat. We bow to enter the place of learning to recognize it is a space different from where now are. We bow to leave the place of learning to recognize that we are leaving a space different than where we are going. We bow before class to recognize the time we are about to spend together is different than the time we spend doing other things with other people. We bow at the end of class to recognize the time we have spent together is different than the time we are about to spend doing other things with other people. Although it is not a requirement of Water Tiger School, some bow at threshold when arriving and before leaving. This ritual can actually serve to help support the idea of the doorway being a gateway for decontamination.

As I did in the essay, [Ritual](#), I am going to quote Linda Myoki Lehrhaupt's *T'ai Chi as a Path of Wisdom* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001, 244) to explain some aspects of a studio shrine:

... shrines have important functions. They create a space that supports intensity and focus. They are repositories for the energy generated there through practice and concentration. In a sense our training space is also a shrine to ourselves, where we celebrate our basic capacity to awaken physically and mentally.

Something else that can sustain our efforts to create a space that supports intensity and focus is the clothes that we wear. Water Tiger School does not require uniforms, but there is something that can be said for making a ritual out of changing clothes before one steps on the mat. Think of a snake shedding its skin. Changing clothes before class is a way to embody shedding your day and all the baggage it brings with you.

A final way that I am going to suggest to shed the baggage of your day and to be sure that both your body and mind are present when you are on the mat is to arrive in a timely fashion. There's nothing like struggling to find a parking place and having to rush to get in the door to scatter the mind and crush one's good intentions. The extra time not only provides a cushion against such stress-inducing feelings, it also provides the opportunity to decompress by playing through whatever stretches, exercises, meditations, etc., that will not only prepare your body, but also help to clear your mind and settle your spirit.



The outside can be loud. The outside can be hectic. The outside can be oppressive. But, it is out there and we are in here.

