

The Empty Boat

..... retelling of a Zen parable (adapted and modified by Amy Fox)

There was once a young Zen monk who lived in a small monastery that was located in a forest which was near a small lake. The monastery was occupied by a few senior monks while the rest were newcomers and still had much to learn. The monks had many obligations in the monastery, but one of the most important ones was their daily routine where they had to sit down, close their eyes, and meditate in silence for hours at a time.

After each meditation, they had to report their progress to their mentor. The young monk had difficulty staying focused during his meditation practice for a variety of reasons, which made him very mad.

One day after the young monk reported his lack of progress, the elder monk asked the young monk a simple question that had a hidden lesson, "Do you know what is really making you angry?"

The young monk replied, "Well, usually as soon as I close my eyes and begin to meditate, there is someone moving around, and I can't focus. I get agitated that someone is disturbing me even though they know that I'm meditating. How can they not be more considerate? And then when I close my eyes again and try to focus, a cat or a small animal might brush past and disturb me again. By this point, even when the wind blows and the tree branches make noise, I get angry. If that is not enough, the birds keep on chirping, and I can't seem to find any peace in this place."

The elder monk simply pointed out to his pupil, "I see that you become angrier with each interruption you encounter. This is exactly the opposite of your task when meditating. You should find a way not to get angry with anything around you that disturbs you during your task."

After their talk, the young monk went out of the monastery and looked around to find a place that would be quieter so that he could meditate peacefully.

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The young monk went in search of a quiet place to meditate and found such a place at the shore of a nearby lake. He brought his mat, sat down, and started meditating. But soon a flock of birds splashed down in the lake near where the monk was meditating.

Although the lake was quieter than the monastery, there were still things that would disturb his peace and he again got angry. Even though he didn't find the peace he was looking for, he kept returning to the lake.

Then one day, the monk saw a boat tied at the end of a small pier. An idea hit him: "Why don't I take the boat, row it down to the middle of the lake and meditate there?" He rowed the boat to the middle of the lake and started meditating.

As he had expected, there was nothing in the middle of the lake to disturb him and he was able to meditate the whole day. At the end of the day, he returned to the monastery. This continued for a couple of days and the monk was thrilled that he had finally found a place to meditate in peace. He hadn't felt angry and could continue the meditation practice in a calm manner.

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On the third day, the monk sat in the boat, rowed to the middle of the lake, and started meditating again. A few minutes later, he heard some splashing of water and felt that his boat was rocking. He started getting upset that even in the middle of the lake there was someone or something disturbing him.

When he opened his eyes, he saw a boat heading straight towards him. He shouted, "Steer your boat away, or else you will hit my boat." But the other boat kept coming straight at him and was just a few feet away. He yelled again but nothing changed and so the incoming boat hit the monk's boat and the monk fell to the back of his boat.

Now, the monk was furious. He screamed, "Who are you, and why have you hit my boat in the middle of this vast lake?" There was no answer. This made the young monk even angrier. He stood up to see who was in the other boat and to his surprise, he found that there was no one in the boat.

The boat had probably drifted along in the breeze and had bumped into the monk's boat. The monk found his anger dissipating. It was just an empty boat! There was no one to get angry at.

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At that moment he remembered his mentors' question, "Do you know what is really making you angry?"

And then wondered, "It's not other people, situations, or circumstances. It's not the empty boat, but my reaction to it that causes my anger. All the people or situations that make me upset and angry are just like the empty boat. They don't have the power to make me angry without my own reaction."

The monk then rowed the boat back to the shore. He returned to the monastery and started meditating along with the other monks. There were still noises and disturbances around, but the monk treated them as the "empty boat" and continued to meditate peacefully. When the elder monk saw the difference, he simply said to the young monk, "I see that you have found what is really making you angry and overcome that."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & PROMPTS

OPENING CLASS

"One who looks around him is intelligent, one who looks within him is wise."

– Mashona Dhliwayo

We live in a world of thought, not reality. Thought is not reality even though it is our thoughts from which our reality is created.

Take a moment to examine your mind, your mental body. What thoughts are swimming around in your mind?

Who would you be without those thoughts? How different would your day or practice look?

See if you can deepen your breath to create space around the thoughts...

DURING CLASS

AFTER TELLING THE STORY

We all have empty boats– things that we cannot control that we react to. But, it is our reaction to those things, not the events themselves, where our power lies. Nothing in our lives– no matter how annoying or challenging– has the power to make us angry without our reaction.

CLOSING CLASS

We want to remember that yoga is not a process of adding something, but rather peeling away obstacles and self-limiting thoughts so that we can reveal the true nature of ourselves and the universe. Ultimately, the root cause of our suffering is our own thinking, the fluctuations of our mind. It is not reality as it is, but how we perceive it to be.

EXTRAS

This lesson pairs great with meditation. Consider starting class in a longer seated meditation or perhaps holding your students in meditation after a really challenging moment of class.