



The Empty Boat

Man in a Boat, Ron Mueck, 2002

*The source of personal power is
the ability to interrupt your own mind.*

Brad Blanton

IMAGINE YOU ARE ROWING ALONG merrily on a lake in your little rowboat.

It's getting dark, and you can barely make out a shape approaching through the thick fog. Closer and closer it gets, and when at last you see that it's another rowboat, you stand up and shout loudly, "Stop! Stop! We're about to crash!"... But there's no reply, and the other boat collides into yours, sending you tumbling to the floorboards.

Enraged, you stumble to your feet, shouting and cursing at the other boat. "Didn't you hear me, you idiot?... Now look what you've done, you've wrecked my boat!" Still no reply, and as you peer into the darkness, you suddenly realize that the other boat is *completely empty*, drifting on the tide.

What happens to your anger? Stripped of anyone to blame, it dissolves into the mist. You'll just have to repair and repaint your boat. Perhaps you may even find yourself laughing, relieved that no one else was there to watch you make such a fool of yourself.

The fact is, all of our painful encounters in life, whether they involve others or not, are like this: *like being hit by an empty rowboat*.

Almost everyone around us acts mechanically, out of their own past experience and overactive imagination. Recognizing this simple fact and treating the events of our life in a detached, impersonal manner, preserving our equanimity and sense of humor no matter how justifiably injured we may feel, can be remarkably transformative.

Simply by examining our thought process—in effect, *by interrupting our own mind*—we reject the impulse to be a passive victim to life's capricious and unpredictable events.

What we resist, persists. In fact, the literal meaning of the word *resentment* is *to feel again*. When we harbor resentment, we replay the past like a video loop, feeling the same emotions welling up once again, only magnified now by the interpretation we have scripted and rehearsed over and over in our mind about ‘what happened.’

We are oblivious to the fact that not only is the past no longer present—and therefore *non-existent*—but our memory of it is only a story we made up in our imagination, given power by repetition. We foolishly carry the non-existent past into the ever-present, timeless *Now*—taking a defensive posture toward others, and in the process becoming mere spectators to our own lives. Over time, we relinquish our power to chart our own course, becoming little more than empty rowboats drifting through the night.

As long as we identify with our ego-centered minds, with their habitual patterns deeply engrained since childhood, we have no real freedom, just like the unconscious people we are directing our resentment, anger and other negative emotions toward.

In fact, this identification with our minds and our fleeting emotions can be seen as a kind of sickness, a severely dysfunctional state of being. It might even be called a form of insanity. And when you peer through the fog of socialization and closely observe those around you, you will see that almost everyone, to varying degrees, is suffering from this insane state of mind!

Once you realize this, how can you cling to fleeting feelings of anger or resentment toward anyone? How can you resent someone who is ill, however unaware they may be of their condition? The only appropriate response is understanding and compassion.

Looking deeper into our thought patterns, we may find something even more startling: *All suffering exists only in the imagination.*

There may, of course, be physical pain—the body’s natural response to an injury—but suffering is an emotional gloss, an additional, habitual, and unnecessary layer laid over the pain by our imagination.

To the ego-mind, the present scarcely exists. It is concerned solely with keeping the imagined past alive, because without the past, *who are you?*...The ego constantly, compulsively projects itself into an imagined future in order to ensure its continued survival, and in doing so it overlooks the present moment—the only thing truly real.

Even when the ego seems to be focused on the present, it misperceives it because it sees it solely through the eyes of the past. Observe your own mind, and you will see that this is how it operates. In fact, it can do nothing else, because the mind is itself illusory in nature: Awareness masquerading as myriad separate, conscious entities, born in the imagination, perpetuated by memory.

Once we see suffering for what it is—our habitual resistance to fully accepting and embracing the present moment—over time a new habit can develop: the recognition of our true, limitless nature as *Awareness* itself.

We may continue to experience suffering, of course, but our identification with it gradually decreases, and along with it, its power to take us away from fully living our lives, with true freedom and spontaneity.

If we offer no resistance to harmless insults and injuries, we become transparent and invulnerable. Refusing to surrender to habitual thought processes, we reclaim the power to control our inner state of being.

Each moment, we have a choice: to row toward the only safe harbor—awareness of our true nature—or to drift along, carried by the tide of fear and emotion. Once we see clearly that the boats of ‘ourselves’ and ‘others’ are in fact *both* empty, there is no longer anything to be afraid of, and nothing to defend. ■