

How to fill a sieve with water

A Buddhist story

Key Ideas: discipleship, learning from the master, disciple, self and selflessness, the divine spirit

The Zen master and his disciple made their way across the sand to the shore. The disciple was carrying a cup and a sieve.

At the water's edge they stood on a rock, the sea breaking around them in great, frothy swirls. 'Show me how you would fill the sieve with water,' the master said. The disciple stooped and filled the cup with water. He poured it into the sieve. Cup after cup he poured into the heart of the sieve but no matter how quickly he poured, only the slightest moisture was left in the bottom. Even that soon formed a drop that was then swallowed in the vastness of the ocean. All the time the master watched, saying nothing.

In the end, the disciple faced the master and shrugged. The task was hopeless. Now, the master spoke: 'It is like this with the life of the human spirit too,' he said. 'So long as we stand on the rock of I, of myself-ness, of selfishness, and try to pour the divine life into that shell, so certainly that life will escape us. This is not the way to fill a sieve with water, nor the human spirit with the life of the divine.'

Then the master reached out his hand and took the sieve from the disciple. He thrust his arm far behind him then launched the sieve as far as he could, out onto the face of the deep. For a moment, it lay glinting in the morning sunlight on the face of the water. Then it slipped far below. 'Now, it is full of water,' the master said. 'And it will always be so. That is how you fill a sieve with water and the spirit with divine life. You throw the myself, the I, far out and away to sink into the deep sea of the divine life.'

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