The Cup Is Already Broken

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Chah is a nice image. He says having the body is like having a cup. You know that someday the cup is going to break. But that doesn’t mean that you treat it casually. You take good care of it. You wash it. You put it away in a safe place. You don’t just throw it away because you know it’s going to be broken. But your attitude has to be that it already is broken. Someday, when it actually does break, despite your best efforts, it won’t be a surprise. So you’ve got to think, “This body is already broken, but it has its uses for the time being.” So you try to get the best use you can out of it. Particularly when you want to meditate, you’re here with the breath. And you want to be on good terms with the breath all the way throughout the body, because you’re receiving impressions all the way throughout the body. So you want the breath to be there to help, to whatever extent you can use it to soothe through the tensions, to soothe through the parts of the body that are poorly connected or tense, so you have more room to settle down. Otherwise, you’re just here in your head. And what else is there in your head? There’s your greed, aversion, and delusion in here. And if you take them as your friends, you’re in really bad shape. We sometimes think that we can go off. If only we could go away and get away from all the other people, we could find some peace. But there’s nowhere you can go that there isn’t a person, i.e., you, going along. And if your friends are your cravings and your defilements, it’s going to be pretty miserable. As John Lee said, it’s like living with crooks and thieves, deceitful people. They don’t care whether they make you miserable or not. They just keep working away, working away, because they’ve got other agendas, they’ve got their desires, they’ve got their issues. So you want to find a friend that doesn’t have so many alien issues. The breath is a good one to start with. It comes in, goes out, just does its thing day in, day out. John Fuhrman once compared it to a nurse who looks after you, cares for you ever since you were a little tiny child, and you don’t pay any attention to the nurse. But the nurse is there, looking after you day in, day out. So finally it’s a good chance to get to know the nurse. Why is this nurse so kind? Why do they keep coming in and going out, providing energy for the body? Get to know this person. And get to know it all the way through. Because one of the purposes of concentration is that you get to fully inhabit this space. You’re on friendly terms with it. You get to know the body to whatever extent you can be, and realize it’s going to have its imperfections. Years back, when I had a problem with my back, someone gave me a book talking about using abdominal exercises to strengthen your back. It’s one of those books where the before pictures looked like the after pictures in most other exercise books. It was pretty discouraging. But there were a couple where the before pictures looked more like what I thought they would look like. And one of them, a person, was talking about how the author of the book had given him encouragement, saying that obviously your body is out of balance, but then everybody’s body is out of balance one way or another. So again, the cup is already broken, or it’s already got a nick, a scratch. But you can still use it. And you want to be on good terms with the parts that you can be on good terms. John Lee’s images of a house with the floorboards are good in most spots, but rotten in a few. So you just avoid the rotten spots. Try to get the breath energy to move around in the spots that are good. And it can eventually, unlike rotten floorboards, help to heal the parts of the body that are blocked off right now. You may not be able to heal them completely, but at least you can get rid of some of the tension that you hold around those areas, and that way you’re aware now that it’s going to begin to seep down into the body. You have a more solid foundation here in the present moment. And then you’ve got your friend. You can be with the body even as greed, aversion, and delusion are telling you all kinds of other things up in your head. But you’ve got the breath, you’ve got the body here to help keep you grounded. And as you learn how to fill this space in the body, you find that it’s less invaded by other energies. If you don’t fill this space, either the greed, aversion, and delusion in your own head is going to go down and take possession of it so that your breathing is constricted and the energy in the body is all screwed up. And then when they’ve got you all tied up that way, then they can do anything they want to with you. So you want to reclaim the breath so that it’s on the side of alertness, it’s on the side of mindfulness, it’s on the side of concentration and well-being. And as you go into the world, you want to be able to inhabit this space so that other people’s energies don’t invade you, too. So in this way you’ve got your friend. You’ve got your foundation. You’ve got your grounding. And even though it may not be perfect, it never was and never will be. And when you have the attitude, “Well, it’s already broken,” then you’re always happy at whatever you can get out of it, whatever little parts you find that, “Well, this part can still be used.” Like a cup whose handle has been cut off. If you’re careful to hold on to it in a way that the broken ends of the handle don’t cut you, you’re okay. You can still use the cup. Or if there’s a nick on the rim, you just don’t use that part. But the parts that are still usable, that are safer, you use those. You make the most of what you’ve got. You don’t just throw the body away. So many people think that Theravada has this really negative, negative attitude toward the body that wants you to hate it. It doesn’t want you to hate it. It wants you to look at it realistically. When we say that the body is already broken, it’s true. There are parts that are already broken. Someday it’s going to break. If you regard it as totally broken already, then you’re ready for the day when it will be totally broken. But in the meantime, you can use your ingenuity in using the parts that are still workable and take joy in those parts. The fact that they’re workable means that they can still be your friends, even though they’re not perfect. It’s like having friends with anybody. If you waited for only the perfect person to have a friend, you’d have no friends in the world. So make the most of this friend. Because if you don’t have the breath energy in the body as your friend, you’re at the mercy of all the greed and aversion and delusion and, as the Buddha said, the cravings that have been your companions. For so long. When you’ve got the body as your friend, you have somebody you can rely on, so you can pull away from the influence of the bad friends. You’ve got somebody good right here.

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