

Already Broken

by Mark Epstein

...on a trip to a forest monastery in northeastern Thailand...my meditation teacher, Jack Kornfield, ...was escorting a group of us to meet the monk under whom he had studied at that forest hermitage. This man, Achaan Chaa, described himself as a "simple forest monk."

After breakfasting on the collected food, we were ushered into an audience with Achaan Chaa. A severe-looking man with a kindly twinkle in his eyes, he sat patiently waiting for us to articulate the question that had brought us to him from such a distance. Finally, we made an attempt "What are you really talking about? What do you mean by 'eradicating craving?'"

Achaan Chaa looked down and smiled faintly. He picked up the glass of drinking water to his left. Holding it up to us, he spoke in the chirpy Lao dialect that was his native tongue: "You see this goblet? For me, this glass is already broken. I enjoy it; I drink out of it. It holds my water admirably, sometimes even reflecting the sun in beautiful patterns. If I should tap it, it has a lovely ring to it. But when I put this glass on a shelf and the wind knocks it over or my elbow brushes it off the table and it falls to the ground and shatters, I say, 'Of course.' But when I understand that this glass is already broken, every moment with it is precious."

Achaan Chaa was not just talking about the glass, of course, nor was he speaking merely of the phenomenal world, the forest monastery, the body or the inevitability of death. He was also speaking to each of us about the self. This self that you take to be so real, he was saying, is already broken. [*Thoughts Without A Thinker*, by Mark Epstein, pp. 79-81.]