



On Things Becoming Lost, Broken, or Worn

There is simply no end to the shifting images that parade before us. If you began making a list of all the people and objects that you've encountered in your life, it would take a near eternity. Just try to remember the number of things that have already passed through your hands. And imagine

those in the future that have not yet been revealed to you. People and things make their way into our lives constantly, and then depart again.

When you spill the milk, drop the glass bowl, or put the broom handle through the lamp shade, you may become mad at yourself and think: *How could I do such a thing? How could I be so careless? What a mess!* You wish you could rewind your action, correct it, and replay it. Consider, though, that these accidents, these unstudied and spontaneous moments, help you to

better appreciate the things that have spilled or been broken. Such moments also show you that you can still be surprised. You feel a surge of adrenaline. You feel invigorated and strange and powerless. You feel, at least for the moment, more charged, more aware and alive.

Buddhism is quick to point out that nothing we see or experience is permanent or unaffected by the transitory nature of existence. In fact, this may be considered to be Buddhism's first law. It is the one true thing that can be depended upon: that all things are unreliable and temporary. This is not exactly what most people care to hear. The haiku poets developed this transitory aspect of existence into a high art form. In the most abbreviated of poetic forms, an arrangement of just seventeen syllables in three written lines, these poets sought to convey the essence of one brief moment of their own lives and to freeze this moment forever, making it always available to us.

Dogen wrote, "All things are Buddha. . . . To carry yourself forward in order to experience things is your delusion. But to allow things to come forward on their own and to experience themselves is enlightenment." How can you give all things the freedom to experience their own natures? Simply by looking at things as they are, and not interjecting your own values, personality, preferences, or judgments upon them. So when you wipe up the milk that spilled and sweep up the shards of broken glass, try to focus on the fact that some things will not last forever, and that there can be an element of danger or surprise in even the most benign occasion. You can then begin to confront the many possibilities inherent in all endings and beginnings.

Although it's said that we live in a "disposable" society, we recognize that some of the things in our lives are irreplaceable: cherished photographs, gifts we've received, certain works of art, and so on. Buddhism shows that, in fact, nothing is replaceable. Each thing before us is precious

and unique; it has its own nature and spirit. And each thing will disappear in its own time and way. Remember “to allow things . . . to experience themselves.” Don’t just ignore or try to discard the little unpleasantries and mistakes that you don’t want to deal with. There are many intractable things in life that are not that easily gotten rid of. And there is a world of difference between your letting go of something and your trying to throw it away.

When you break something, is your first impulse to throw it away? Or do you repair it but feel a twinge of sadness because it is no longer “perfect”? Whatever the case, you might want to consider the way the Japanese treated the items used in their tea ceremony. Even though they were made from the simplest of materials, clay and basic glazes, these teacups and bowls were revered for their plain lines and spiritual qualities. They were treated with the utmost care, integrity, and respect. For this reason, a cup from the tea ceremony was almost never broken. When an accident did occur and a cup was broken, there were certain instances in which the cup was repaired with gold. Rather than trying to restore it in a way that would cover up the fact that it had been broken, the cracks were celebrated in a bold and spirited way. The thin paths of shining gold completely encircled the ceramic cup, announcing to the world that the cup was broken and repaired and vulnerable to change. And in this way, its value was even further enhanced.

People tend to cover up their mistakes, to restore things to how they were before, to pretend that everything has been fixed and that things are the same as they were before and that their hearts have not been broken. In actuality, things do break. They do melt. They do let you down occasionally. And in the course of time, *you* also break and change; you become “strong in the broken places,” as a country song puts it. You try to learn from your experiences and to share, rather than hide your humanity.

We can all appreciate new things because we sense a freshness about them, a vigor and potential lacking in something old and worn. Yet it is through age and use that objects, as well as living beings, develop character. There is something satisfying about the smooth feeling of a much-used tool, an old and comfortable sweater, a familiar and often-read book. We can learn to appreciate the ancient and scarred oak; to look at all the lines and seams and chipped surfaces of things and see their service and their true beauty; to value that things "are as they are."

During times of great misfortune, when a loved one dies or a house is consumed by fire, people will tend to pause and look for meaning in what's happened. But even life's tiny everyday occurrences—the sparrow hopping along the front porch, the spreading puddle of milk on the floor, the worn cutting board—offer you a chance to contemplate and learn something about your life. In fact, these moments demand that you give genuine attention to them. They are calling out for you to share yourself with them totally because only in this way will they fully exist for you.