

The Wise, Experienced Cook

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The Buddha once compared a good meditator to a good cook. A good cook knows how to make different kinds of food and serve them to his master, and then notice what the master likes—whether he goes for the salty food, the sweet food, the bitter food, or the bland. And the cook takes note of that so that tomorrow he can fix more of the food that the master likes.

I saw something like this happen in Thailand once. There were two women who fixed a lot of the food for Ajaan Fuang when he was staying in Bangkok. One of them actually took note of what kinds of food Ajaan Fuang liked. And the other woman was very jealous: Why did the first woman seem to know what he liked? Was the Ajaan giving her some secret signals? Was he telling her what he liked when the second woman wasn't around? But that wasn't the case at all. The first woman just watched carefully. The second woman wasn't watching.

It's the same when you meditate. If you watch carefully what works in your mind and what doesn't work in your mind, then you can make adjustments. You can make the meditation saltier, sweeter, more bitter, or more bland. What this means is that the function of mindfulness is not simply to keep the teachings you've heard in mind, or the things you've read in mind, but you also try to keep in mind the experience of meditating, and particularly noticing what you did and what results you get out of it.

As the Buddha said, if you do that, then you gain your reward: a sense of well-being, greater mindfulness, greater alertness. Which are the rewards of concentration.

If you don't take note of what does and doesn't work, then you don't get the rewards. Just like a cook who's not observing what the master likes. The master won't really be happy with the food.

So think about this as you meditate: that there are lots of different ways you can approach the breath, lots of different ways you can focus the mind. The purpose of the teachings is to give you a sense of the range, or at least a beginning sense of the range of various options you have. Then you apply these alternatives to what you're doing and notice what's working today. Is it going to work tomorrow? You learn by watching again. This way you learn how to read your mind. So notice when it's showing the signs that it needs more firmness and when it's showing some signs that it needs some tenderness. It's not all about being tender and open. But it's certainly not all about being stern and harsh.

You've got to give the mind the training it needs. And you have to learn how to read the signs of what's working and what's not, so that you can make adjustments. There are lots of things to adjust here in the way you focus on things. We're not always just being passive and observant. At the same time we're not always meddling with things. There are times when you watch and times when you experiment and then you watch again. It's this way you develop the right touch so that the mind will respond.

In Thailand there was one Ajaan who personally I didn't like but I found his Dhamma talks really effective. They tended to have a fairly harsh tone. They would

start out very slow and mild and then develop a stronger and stronger rhythm, with a stronger and stronger message. I found them really bracing. So it was a strange thing. I didn't like him personally, but I liked his Dhamma talks, or I found them effective. Not that I liked the idea of a harsh Dhamma talk, but it worked. So I learned to adjust my tastes away from what I liked and didn't like and toward what worked. Instead of having a preconceived notion about how I wanted to be treated, I learned to look for what works, what has a good effect on the mind.

Of course there were other Ajaans who were very harsh all the time and I found myself just closing off to them.

So the things you learn are not all generalities. We're here to develop a skill and a skill requires that you read the situation. Then you apply what's appropriate in line with the particulars of the situation, in terms of what works, what gets the kind of results you need.

So keep these points in mind: that you're here not only to remember the teachings and then force them on the mind. You're trying to gain a range of skills to apply them in the mind and see what works and what doesn't work. What kind of breathing works when there's blockage in the body? How do you work with it? In some cases, you can immediately breathe through it and it's gone. In other cases, it resists, which is usually a sign that there may be a psychological issue in addition to the physical issue. So you have to step back a bit, and invite the situation to open up. It may not respond. It may take a while before it decides that it trusts you. And you have to learn to be okay with that.

So we can't take a doctrinaire approach as to what's right and what's wrong in the meditation. But we *do* have to be observant and have standards as to what counts as good results and what counts as results that are going to pull you off the path. This puts a lot of responsibility on you as a meditator, but that's important. Some people want to be told just to do this, this, this, without their having to think. That's just a mechanical approach, in which you can push the mind through the meat grinder and gain guaranteed enlightenment at the end. But you don't get enlightened that way. You just end up with ground beef.

The only way you can develop discernment is by being sensitive. And "sensitive" here doesn't mean that you have sensitive feelings that are easily hurt. It means being sensitive to what's actually going on, sensitive to what you're doing, and sensitive to how it connects with the results. This is why we have to develop concentration. It's the steadiness of our gaze that allows us to see the connection between what we did and the results when they come up. Sometimes they're immediate. Sometimes they're not. But it's only when you learn how to develop that sensitivity to cause and effect that you're going to gain the genuine discernment that leads to release.

In the instructions on mindfulness, the Buddha says you try to watch the process of origination and passing away. Notice that he says "origination." He doesn't say just "arising and passing away." Origination has a different meaning in Pali. It means seeing causes. When something arises, why is it arising? What's arising along with it? And the only way you can check for what's actually a connected cause and what's simply a coincidence is by changing the causes. This is how scientists test physical laws. If you change this, does the result change? If you change that, does the result change? If you

change what seems to be a cause, but there's no change in the result, that shows that it's probably not one of the causal factors. So you move on and search for something else. But it's only when you make changes and adjustments like this that you actually see this process of origination.

In other words, you have to see for yourself. We like the idea of "see for yourself" or "take your own standards," but the Buddha actually sets high standards for you to live up to if you want what you've seen for yourself to be really reliable. He tells you to listen to the wise because the wise have a lot to tell you. But there comes a point where you've learn from them and then you have to apply what you've learned on your own. And this is where there's a lot of responsibility.

You can't keep throwing things back on the teacher. I had a student once whose attitude was, "If the teacher doesn't already know ahead of time what's going to work for me, then he's not really a teacher." So he went away. Then he found out wherever he went, all the teachers were teaching the same thing: "Try this and see what works. If it doesn't work, try to figure out something else that does."

Again it's like being a good cook. You can follow the cookbooks, but there will come times when you don't have all the ingredients in a given recipe, so what do you substitute? Or it turns out that your ingredients are not quite the same as the ones in the cookbook: How do you adjust the proportions? Maybe the person who wrote the cookbook really liked salty food or really hated salty food. Your taste buds are different. You've got to learn how to make adjustments and use your ingenuity. This way your in a position where you can take responsibility for your meditation. This is not just a matter of doing what you like. It's a matter of doing what you think will work. But then you look at it. Does it really work? And you try to develop good standards for judging what works and what doesn't work.

Again, this is where you want to listen to the wise, because they can have some good advice for you. I don't know how many times I've heard people say, "This particular technique works for me." Well, what does it mean to work? Maybe it makes them feel a little bit better or a little more relaxed. Well, feeling a little bit better is not what the meditation is all about. It's supposed to go deep, make radical changes inside.

And there are times when the meditation is going to involve doing things you don't like—pushing yourself harder than you may want to, demanding more of yourself than you may want to give—but they're going to give good results.

There's that phrase: The great way is not difficult for those with no preferences. And here they're not talking about having no preferences in terms of results. The preference is to put an end to suffering. That's a very clear preference and that has to drive everything we do. When they're talking about having no preferences it means that if you find that something works, then whether you like it or not, you do it. If something doesn't work, then whether you like it or not, you don't do it. You can't let your preferences for those actions get in the way of the goal.

And you have to learn how to talk yourself into doing the things that are difficult to do and talk yourself out of doing the things that are easy to do, but are going to give bad results. That's a real sign of wisdom. That's a real sign of discernment.

So learn to be a discerning cook, because you're the one who's going to have to eat the food.