

Cooking the Present Moment

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Meditating is like being a cook when you're not totally in charge of who's doing the purchases. In other words, you go into the kitchen and you look into the refrigerator and sometimes you find what you want and sometimes you find what you don't want. But if you're a good cook, you can make good food out of anything. That's why, when you're learning to cook, the important thing is learning the basic skills, so that regardless of what's in the refrigerator, you can make something at least edible, even if it's not totally what you want to make that particular day.

What comes in the refrigerator, of course, stands for your old karma. As the Buddha said, your body, sitting here right now, is old karma.

So what are you going to do with it? You try to make it into something nice, something edible. You do that by working with the breath. That's the element of the body, the property of the body that's easiest to work with. You can change the way you breathe from long to short, from short to long; heavy, light, fast, slow, deep, shallow. Taste it to see what seems best right now. From there you can work on the other elements. Like on a day like this, when it's pretty hot, where are the cool spots in the body? How can you make the most of those? As for pains in the body, for the time being, work around them.

You may have to accept the fact that tonight's meditation is not going to be totally blissful. You're not going to have nothing but pleasure saturating the body. There will be spots in the body, here and there, where there's a little bit of pain. But it's important that you learn how to focus on the areas that are comfortable and that you can make more comfortable.

It's like that book, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*. The author points out that most of us, if we were to draw an eye, a nose, or a mouth, would basically be drawing our perceptions of those things, our cartoon ideas of what an eye should look like or a mouth should look like. And often, as a result, our drawings are not that realistic. So she recommended drawing the spaces between these things. In other words, parts of the face that you don't ordinarily focus on. Look at them—and look at them as if for the first time, basically. Draw those parts, the space between the nose and the mouth, the space between the eyes and the nose, the eyes and the eyebrow. Usually you end up with a much better rendering. The same face, but a different picture.

It's the same with the body. You could be sitting here focusing on your pains, right off from the start, but then your breath will get constricted by the pain. You'll breathe up to the edge of the pain and then stop right there. But if you perceive the pain as porous, or if you focus on the areas around the pain, you find that the breath can go all the way around, can go all the way through. The way you breathe will be different, and you'll have a different experience of

the body.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha kept saying that things we experience are not just the result of past karma. We've got our present karma coming in, too. And for that present karma, some of the limitations on our ability to choose have to do with our range of skills. So as you meditate, you want to learn a wider range of skills on how to deal with different issues as they come up. This is why we practice. You can't put everything that's going to happen in meditation into a book. You have the instructions in the book, you've got the basic principles, and then you have to learn how to expand on those in your own experience.

For instance, the book may say to have the breath energy go down the back. Well, sometimes you may want to have it come up the back, say, on days when the back feels weak. But if it comes up the back, make sure that it has a way not to get stuck in your head. Either it goes out the top, or comes up over the head and then down through the throat, down to the chest, down to the navel.

Other guided meditations start in one spot and then generally work from the center out to the edges of the body. But sometimes you may want to work the other way around. Start with the fingers, relax those, work up through your hands, your arms, shoulders. Then start again with the toes, come up through the feet, the legs, your pelvis, your back, up through the neck, and into the skull.

Learn how to play with these basic principles in the same way that you would expand on your range of skills as a cook. Sometimes you've got some ingredients that really aren't all that good. Maybe you've got some old produce in the back of the refrigerator you've got to take care of. Well, you know how to fix that so that it's at least palatable and actually something pretty good.

In more general terms, the Buddha talks about past karma, especially past bad karma, as being like a big lump of salt. If you throw it into a little cup of water, the water is undrinkable. If you throw it into the water of a large clean river, you can still drink the water; it's not too salty because there so much water there.

The water there stands for a wide range of things. One, the fact that you're virtuous. That expands the mind. You're not thinking only about your own gains from something, or only about what you can get out of something. You think about the impact of your actions on other people as well. That makes the mind broader.

Then there's your discernment, your ability to see what is it in a pain that's actually causing suffering.

The Buddha talks about different kinds of pain. There's the pain of fabrication. There's the pain of the simple fact that things change. Then there's the pain of unpleasant sensations. And it turns out that unpleasant sensation is not what weighs the mind down, it's the fabrication. That's what gets the mind: the fact that you're making something out of the pain, using your perceptions, using your thought constructs. If you're doing it unskillfully, there's just going to

be more mental pain on top of the physical pain. So you have to learn how to perceive the pain in such a way that it's not weighing the mind down.

Then there's the ability to not be overcome by pleasure or by pain. Again, this has to do with your perceptions, it also has to do with your ability to get your mind into concentration despite the pain, so that once the mind is in concentration, it's not so easily overcome by pain—or by pleasure.

Learning to get the mind to settle down requires being with the breath at the same time that there's pleasure arising from your being with the breath. You allow the pleasure to be there but you don't go running into the pleasure. The cause is the fact you're with the breath, so you stay with the breath and allow the pleasure to do its work. Just this much gives you good practice and not getting overcome by pain and not getting overcome by pleasure or sucked into the pleasure.

Finally, the large body of water also stands for the willingness to make your mind unlimited. That refers, of course, to the *brahma-viharas*: goodwill for all, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity for all. If you find that you're suffering a lot from something that's happening in your life, ask yourself: Are you lacking in any of these qualities? Which one are you lacking in? Where is the mind narrowing down? Are you jealous of people's good fortune? Do you have ill will for people who have harmed you or harmed other people you love? Can you get around that?

Remember what goodwill means. It's a wish for happiness—a wish that all beings will understand the causes for happiness and act on them. In other words, you're not trying to force yourself to like someone who has done something really bad. You're simply hoping for them to realize that what they are doing is unskillful and that they will stop. That's a wish you can have for anybody. There may be a little part of the mind, though, that tugs on it and says, "I'd like to see this person suffer a little bit before they start having true happiness." That's something you've got to watch out for.

So check your mind. How's your virtue? How's your discernment? Are you able to not be overcome by pleasure? Are you able to not be overcome by pain? Are your attitudes toward the world in line with the *brahma-viharas*? If you've got all that going, then when bad stuff comes in from the past and you're a good cook, you know how to deal with it. Sometimes you can take things that are even rotting a little bit and turn them into good food. If you find that you're lacking in any of those attitudes, ask why you want to keep the mind narrow. A lot of it has to do with our desire for the things coming in from the past to be nothing but lumps of sugar. We keep our cups small because we think that the less water there is in the cup, the more intensely sweet the water's going to be when that sugar comes. But look what happens: We're not always getting sugar, we're getting salt. Sometimes there's nothing worse than salt when it's too intense.

So instead of looking for the intensity of a pleasure, of nice things happening to you, learn

to take pleasure in your skills, the skills you develop as a meditator: the skills in virtue, concentration, discernment, learning how to deal with pleasure, learning how to deal with pain, developing the unlimited state of mind that goes with the brahma-viharas. Those are the skills that make you into a good cook, so that whatever is in the refrigerator, you can make it into good, delicious food.