

Cooking Skills

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A lot of people don't like the teaching on karma because it sounds fatalistic: You did something bad in the past; you're going to have to suffer now. The irony, of course, is that the Buddha said that that was one of the worst forms of wrong view there is. The way he taught karma was a lot more complex and offered a lot more leeway for freedom of choice, and also freedom to not suffer—because after all, that's the whole purpose of his teachings. They teach you how not to suffer, no matter what your past karma is.

As he pointed out, there's past karma and there's present karma, and our experience of the present moment is a combination of both. You've got the results of past karma coming in, you've got the intentions you're making right now, and then the results of those intentions right now. All of those together create your present experience.

You can't do much about your past karma. What's done is done. But the way you take the potentials coming from past karma and shape them into your experience of the present moment—that's a skill that can be mastered. This is why we meditate, why meditation focuses on what the mind is doing in the present moment.

It focuses on the three things that we're in a good position to adjust in the present moment: the three kinds of fabrication. There's bodily fabrication: the in-and-out breath. Verbal fabrication: directed thought and evaluation—in other words, the way you talk to yourself. You choose a topic and then you comment on it. And then mental fabrication: perceptions—the labels you apply to things, the images you apply—and then feelings, feelings of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. These are all things that we can adjust in the present moment, so that no matter what the potentials coming in from the past, we don't have to suffer from them.

It's like being a good cook. The best cooks are the ones who don't have to have *only these* special ingredients in order to make good food. Whatever's in the refrigerator, whatever's in the pantry, they can make something good out of it.

So as you're meditating, you're learning to be a good cook. You focus on the breath and you realize there are lots of different ways of breathing: You can breathe in ways that are constrictive and unpleasant, or you can breathe in ways that are more wide open, more nourishing. So why choose the constricted ways?

Usually, it's because we're not paying attention. We're thinking about something else.

So here we're going to think solely about the breath. That's where we bring the verbal fabrication. Keep your attention directed to the breath, and then comment on it. Does it feel good? If it doesn't feel good, what would feel better: longer, shorter, faster, slower, deeper, more shallow, heavier, or lighter? When you find a rhythm that feels good, maintain it as long as it feels good. Then when you can maintain it, you can think of it spreading through the different parts of the body, because you're trying to get a state of mind where your awareness fills the body; a sense of ease fills the body as well; a sense of fullness fills the body.

So how do you take that place in the body where things feel good and let it spread? You can think of the different blood vessels and nerves as a big network that goes out to the pores of the skin. You're aware of that network through the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, and you try to think of it all melding together, working in harmony.

You're aided in this by your perceptions, the images you hold in mind. So what image do you have of the breath? You can think of it as the air coming in and out through the nose, or you can think of it as an energy flow: the flow of energy through the blood vessels, the flow of energy through the nerves. Hold that image in mind and see what it does to the way you breathe.

And where are *you* in relationship to the breath? Sometimes there's the tendency to feel that we're outside of the body a little bit, looking in. But you have to remember: The breath is all around you. All too often we say, "Watch the breath," when it actually should be, "*Feel* the breath." Allow the breath to bathe you. Hold that image in mind: As you breathe in, it's coming down not only the front of the body, but also down the back of the body; down the sides, all the way down to the toes. It's all around you. Hold that image in mind. See what that does.

These are your cooking skills. The Buddha himself makes this analogy: He says the wise cook who knows his master doesn't have to wait for the master to say, "I'd like more of this." The cook notices: Does the master eat more of the salty food or more of the sweet food? Sour, bitter, bland—whatever the master likes, the cook makes more of that and gets a reward. It's because he's observant.

Ajaan Lee adds another detail to that image, noticing that sometimes the master likes one food one day and another food another day. So you have to keep changing your offerings. If it's porridge today, porridge tomorrow, and porridge the next day, the day after that the master's going to get a new cook.

In the same way, as a meditation good cook, you have to be both observant and ingenious, which are the two qualities that Ajaan Fuang used to say are really necessary in the meditation: You have to be observant and you have to use your powers of ingenuity. When things aren't working as you try to keep the mind with the breath, what would work better? When things have been working well, how do you maintain it?

This is how the teaching on karma applies to the meditation: There are some things coming from the past that you can't do much about. Other times, there's plenty of room for adjustment. The Buddha noted one time that there are three kinds of disease: There are the diseases where, whether you take medicine or not, you're *not* going to recover. There are the diseases where, whether you take medicine or not, you *will* recover. Then there are the ones where you'll recover only if you take medicine, but not if you don't.

As he said, it's because of that third type of disease that you give medicine to all three, because you really never know ahead of time which category your disease is going to fall into. In other words, in some cases, the karma coming in from the past is pretty bad. There's not much you can do to change the physical condition in the present moment. In other cases, it's not that bad at all. You don't have to do much. Anything bad is going to go away on its own. Where the skill is most useful is where it will make a difference in the present moment. And even in cases where you can't make much of a difference in terms of the bodily karma coming in from the past, as long as you have your wits about you, you *can* make a difference in the mind. That's where the Buddha's medicine focuses.

The Buddha's often compared to a doctor. The four noble truths are compared to the doctor's approach to treating a disease: There's the diagnosis, suffering. Then there's the analysis of the cause. Then there's the prognosis that this disease can be cured. And then there's the course of treatment, the noble eightfold path.

So we're here to cure the diseases of the mind using the breath, to at least help alleviate some of the symptoms of the body in the present moment, but also to give the mind a good place to stay so that we can alleviate any bad symptoms in the mind. You use your directed thought and evaluation, along with your perceptions, to create pleasant feelings with the breath: the kind of feelings that can you maintain. These are not the ordinary feelings that just arise and pass away willy-nilly. They're the feelings you give rise to as you learn how to breathe properly, how to focus on the breath, so that you can maintain them.

After all, this is the duty of mindfulness when it becomes a governing principle. All too often we're told that mindfulness is all about simply seeing things arising and passing away. But actually, when you have mindfulness as a

governing principle, when you see that something good hasn't arisen, you want to be mindful to make it arise. Once it's there, you want to be mindful to make sure it doesn't pass away. That's what mindfulness is for.

So these are some of your cooking skills, the skills you use in the present moment, so that no matter what's coming in from the past, you don't have to suffer from it—because after all, that is the essence of the Buddha's teachings. He didn't teach the end of suffering only to people who had exclusively good karma. He said, "Look, if you're suffering, here's the way to the end"—regardless of what your past karma is. If you can create good karma in the present moment, you can put an end to suffering. And you can lessen your suffering right now.

You have that choice—another reason why, when the Buddha, who ordinarily wouldn't look for people who he would argue with, would go out and argue with people who said that you didn't have freedom of choice in the present moment, or that your choices had no impact on anything. You *do* have that choice, and your choices *do* matter. You *can* develop these skills, so that even though there's pain in the body, the mind doesn't have to suffer. The world outside can be crazy, but the mind doesn't have to suffer. If you were able to put an end to suffering only after the world became perfect, it would never happen.

So here we are, trying to find some perfection inside, in the midst of this imperfect world. And it is possible to attain. You can perfect your cooking skills, so that when you go into the kitchen, no matter what's in the pantry, you can make something good.