

## *Cooking the Present Moment*

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Meditating is like being a cook when you're not totally in charge of the person who's doing the purchases. In other words, you go into the kitchen and look in the refrigerator. 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 how 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 wanted to make that particular day.

What comes in the refrigerator, of course, stands for your old karma. The Buddha says your body here, sitting here right now, is old karma. What are you going to do with it? You try and make it into something nice, something edible. So you work with the breath. That's the element or 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 or light, fast or slow, deep or shallow. Taste it to see what seems best right now.

From there, you can work with 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 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 pointed 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: the kind of cartoon ideas we have about what an eye or a mouth should look like. 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. Look at them 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—and usually, you end up with a much better rendering. The same face, different picture.

It's the same with the body. You could be sitting here, focusing on your pains right off from the start, and then your breath will get constricted by the pain. You breathe right 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 or 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 the things we experience are not just the result of past karma. We've got our present karma coming in, too. And with our 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. For instance, the book may say to have the breath energy go down the back. Well, sometimes you want to have it come *up* the back. 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 it comes up over the head and on down through the throat, down through the chest to the navel.

Other guided meditations start in one spot and then generally work it 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. Or start with the toes, come up through the feet, the legs, the 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 are not really all that good, and 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 it's at least palatable—and actually, something pretty good.

In more general terms, the Buddha talks about past karma, especially bad past karma, as being like a big lump of salt. If you throw it into a little cup of water, the water's 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's so much water there.

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

Then there's your discernment, your ability to see what it is in a pain, as it comes up, 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 fact that things change. There's the pain of simply unpleasant sensations. And it turns out that unpleasant sensation isn't 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. You're using your perceptions and you're using your thought constructs. If you're doing it unskillfully, there's going to be more pain—in other words, 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 not to be overcome by pleasure or by pain, and this, too, has to do with your perceptions. It also has to do with your ability to get the mind into concentration *despite* the pain. Once the mind is in concentration, it's not so easily overcome by pleasure or pain. If you learn to get the mind to settle down, it requires being with the breath, and 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 that 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 in not getting overcome by pain or pleasure, or sucked into the pleasure.

And finally, there's the willingness to make your mind unlimited. That refers, of course, to the brahmaviharas: having goodwill for all, compassion, empathetic joy, and 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 these qualities? Which one are you lacking in? Where is the mind narrowing down? Are you jealous of other 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 like someone who's done something really bad. You're hoping that they'll realize that what they're doing is unskillful and that they'll stop. That's a wish you can have for anybody. But there may be a little part of the mind that tugs on it, and says, "Well, I would 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 not to be overcome by pain? Your attitudes to the world: Are they in line with the brahmaviharas? 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 you can make 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 stuff coming in from the past to be nothing but lumps of sugar. We keep our cup small because 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 we're getting things worse than salt.

So instead of looking for the intensity of a pleasure—nice things happening to you—learn to take pleasure in your skills, the skills that you develop as a meditator: the skills in virtue, concentration, discernment, learning how to deal with pleasure, learning how to deal with pain, and developing that unlimited state of mind that goes with the brahmaviharas.

Those are the skills that make you into a good cook so that whatever's in the refrigerator, you can make it into good, delicious, nutritious food.