Cooking Food for the Mind

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Just as the body needs nourishment, the mind needs nourishment as well. And just as there’s good and bad food for the body, there’s good and bad food for the mind. As meditators, we’re trying to learn how to make good food, how to nourish the mind so that its good qualities get strengthened. So as you’re meditating here, think of yourself as a cook. You’re preparing food for the mind. You’re both the cook and the eater. So there are two things you’ve got to think about as a good cook. One, is the food going to taste good? Because if you don’t prepare tasty food for the mind, it’s going to start looking for food some other places. The second thing you’ve got to think about is, is the food you’re cooking really good for the mind? There are a lot of cuisines, especially in Asia, that have been developed not only to make the food taste good, but also to make it a kind of medicine. So when you’re feeling feverish or coming down with a cold, there are certain kinds of food they’ll have you eat. As a meditator, you want to take the same approach and see what the mind’s illnesses are right now. What kind of food would help counteract those illnesses? So there are two things you’ve got to think about. One is the taste, the enjoyment, the taste of the food. The enjoyment that the food should give simply in the consumption of the food. And then two, the long-term results, whether it’s bringing your constitution into balance or out of balance. One of the reasons we keep looking for pleasure and happiness and fulfillment outside is because we don’t know how to look after our own minds. We’re not really good cooks. We have a very limited range of skills. We can boil eggs. We can make sandwiches, and that’s about it. So for fancier foods, you look to other people. You look to outside entertainments, all kinds of stuff, when you don’t really need to. Because a lot of that outside food, one, is junk food. And two, even when it looks like good food, who knows what poisons have been laced in the food. Sometimes they may be able to make food taste good by putting in MSG, which tastes good for a while, but after a while it starts being bad for you. So in order to be confident that your food is healthy, it’s worth your while to learn how to be a good cook. Now, part of being a good cook is getting good recipe books. This is what meditation instructions are all about. Learning the basic skills of how to sauté, how to boil, how to barbecue, how to make sauces. In other words, the instructions are there, so you don’t have to reinvent the Dharma wheel every time you sit down to meditate. And the instructions also come with directions on how a particular type of food should be eaten. So a particular type of meditation is good for a particular type of problem, i.e., treating food as medicine. Your basic diet here is the breath. Fortunately, the breath has lots of variations in other various meditations. Exercises out there are probably the safest, because there’s not much content to the breath. It’s basically feelings, a sense of energy. But in order to keep it from getting dull, you have to realize that the energy in your body can be manipulated in all kinds of ways. John Lee gives some basic instructions in his method, too. But breath meditation isn’t limited to those instructions. There are lots of ways you can play with the breath energy. Lots of places you can focus. You can focus on your little toes if you want to. You can focus on the base of the spine, anywhere in the body, as long as you open your imagination to the realization that the breath is in every part of the body, this property of energy. It’s all around. And if you pay close attention, you realize that it does different things in the body. It moves in different ways. After a while, you begin to gain a sense of what kinds of movement in the breath are good for you and which ones are bad, because there are unhealthy ways of breathing, unbalanced ways of breathing. Sometimes an unbalanced way is precisely what you need, because your mind is often on the opposite side of the balance. So you have to learn how to read your mind, read the state of the body, and then, through experimenting and trying things out, get a sense of what’s possible with the breath and how you can bring things back into balance. That’s your essential diet. It’s the bread of your meditation. But beyond that, there are other objects that you can focus on, other themes you can use, when you find the mind is often out of balance in other ways. One way is when it’s not willing to stay with the breath. You have to ask yourself, “Okay, what’s the issue? Is it lust? Is it anger? Is it laziness? Is it discouragement?” Then look for alternative themes that can help bring you back into balance. For instance, lust. You can think about the aging, illness, and death of the body. You can think about dividing the body up into its 32 parts. That’s a way of really making it hit home that you don’t really want an actual body. You want just your ideas, and your ideas are kind of blind. You notice what lust is like. You focus on certain aspects, certain features, and you blot out everything else. But when you go just for those aspects and details, you don’t get just them. You get everything else as well. You want to keep that in mind so that when you start getting that very narrow focus in your mind, you have a way of giving yourself a reality to check. Once you get a reality check, you can start looking at the fantasies and realize how blind they are. Then you can do what a John Lee did at that time when he thought he wanted to disrobe. Think about it. What would it be like to run the whole thing through your imagination, but be very honest with yourself about what’s involved in following through with that particular type of lust? Then you watch it die. When it dies, then you can come back to the breath. These sort of side roads of the meditation are not the sort of thing that you shouldn’t go all the way with. You have to have a way of balancing them. There’s that famous story of the monks who were meditating on the unattractiveness of the body and just got so disgusted and so repulsed that they started committing suicide. The Buddha found out, and he said, “Look, when unskillful mind states come into the mind, go back to the breath. The breath will help clear them out in the same way that the first rain of the rainy season clears the dust and heat out of the air at the end of the hot season.” So learn to use these side roads as just that side road, so that you get around a block of dust in the main road. Then you find that when they’ve done their work, you can come back to the main road and keep going. When laziness comes up, you might want to think about death, realizing that you have no idea when it’s going to come. So the work of the meditation is to remind yourself that if you’ve got the opportunity to do it now, you better do it now, not just put it off. Then remind yourself of how good it is that you’ve got this opportunity. You want to make the most of it. Again, there’s the problem with focusing on death. It starts getting discouraging and depressing. It saps your energy. So learn how to think about it in a skillful way. Again, this is learning how to be a skillful cook. There are some foods out there that can be good for you if you fix them in the right way, but if you don’t fix them in the right way, they’re actually poisonous. This is one of them. If you’re feeling discouraged, you can think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, particularly the Sangha. Sometimes it’s hard to think about the Buddha as a model for your own life, because he seems so superhuman. But there are tales, say, in the Theravada and also in the lives of the forest dhajjons, that make you realize how they’re real people, just like you and me, with all their limitations, sometimes worse than ours, and yet they were able to overcome those limitations. So it’s not just a matter of thinking about it. It’s not impossible. It may be demanding. It may take everything out of you, but you’ve got it. You’ve got all the potentials you need for awakening. It’s simply a matter of learning how to use them. It’s like having a refrigerator full of food. Some of the food is good, some of the food isn’t good. You learn how to use the good food, throw away the bad. Another thing to get over discouragement is to think about mistakes you’ve made in the past but you’ve learned from them, skills you’ve developed in the past that you were able to overcome your lack of skill. You could do it then, you can do it now. Or, as Ananda says in one of the suttas, if you think about other people who’ve gained awakening, they can do it. Well, you’re a human being, too. They can do it. So can you. The use of conceit has its place. But again, we know that conceit has its downside as well. So with all these themes for thinking, you learn how to use them in your diet when they’re healthy, when they’re helpful for whatever your condition is, and then stop when you’ve got the body back into balance. That’s learning how to choose your food wisely. It’s learning how to fix them well and gaining a sense of what you need in order to bring the body back into balance and recognizing what it is in balance. When you’re feeling anger, there’s always thoughts of goodwill. First, having goodwill for yourself. The old image of someone picking up a burning coal to throw at somebody else. Well, who’s the first person who gets burned? You’re the one who gets burned, for sure. It’s the same with anger. You burn yourself up. To what purpose? If you really had goodwill for yourself, you wouldn’t indulge in these things. Of course, the reason we indulge in anger is because there’s part of us that likes it. But you want to look at the pleasure you get out of the anger and then the drawbacks of giving in to the anger. As the Buddha said, when you’re angry, you do the sorts of things to yourself that an enemy would be glad to see happen to you. Sometimes you destroy your belongings. Sometimes you destroy friendships. You yourself don’t look good. You have trouble sleeping at night. An enemy, if they found out about this, boy, would be really happy. Do you want to give the enemy that kind of satisfaction? That kind of motivation may not sound especially noble, but it works. Then you start thinking goodwill for yourself. And then you start thinking about the other person. Many times the people who have you most angry are the ones that you love the most. It’s good to remind yourself that you’ve got to have goodwill for them. Remind yourself of their good habits, why you love them to begin with. So you begin to see that the anger, just like the lust, comes from focusing on certain details and blocking out all kinds of other things. So you learn to look at things from both sides. Once you’ve been able to pull the mind away from its obsession with that particular object, that particular thing that had you set off, then you can look at the anger simply as an event in and of itself in the mind, and ask yourself, “Do I want to feed on this? What kind of food is this?” It’s like eating hot chilies. A pure diet of hot chilies is going to destroy your stomach. So you feed on something cooling and soothing, reminding yourself that your ultimate happiness doesn’t have to depend on other people. It’s something that comes from within. And your true happiness doesn’t conflict with other people’s true happiness. When you wish goodwill to someone else, it doesn’t mean that you wish they’d be happy in spite of what they’re doing. If they’re doing something unskillful, you wish that they might see the light and learn how to behave in skillful ways. So you’re not required to like the other person. You’re not required to like what they’re doing. But you remind yourself that the issue of true happiness does not have to involve conflict. It has to come from within. When you can think in this way, it brings your thoughts back to the breath in the present moment. Then you’re going to ask yourself, “What kind of breathing would I like right now?” In this way, you become an expert cook. You fix food that’s delicious, and you learn how to vary the taste from day to day so you don’t get bored with your own cooking. At the same time, you learn to fix food that’s healthy. The food actually becomes medicine. In this way, the strength of the mind can grow. Conviction in the Buddha’s awakening, persistence in the practice. Mindfulness, concentration, discernment. These are all the strengths of the mind, and they require good food, the food of the meditation, when you know how to fix it well. So remind yourself each time you meditate that you’re the cook and you’re also the person eating the food. On the one hand, you can vary the flavor in whatever way you want, whatever seems appealing right now. There’s that side to the meditation, but then there’s also the other side. There are certain rules that you have to follow in the cooking, especially in terms of finding a diet that’s balanced and that can take a constitution that’s out of balance and bring it back into balance. So your skills here are of two sorts. One is getting a sense of cause and effect in terms of what works and what doesn’t work, learning how to read your state of mind. And learning from experience what helps a particular state of mind turn from unhealthy into a healthy one. And at the same time, learning how to make food that really tastes good, so it’s enjoyable, tastes good, and it’s good for you. That’s the sign of a really good cook. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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