Roast the Beans but Don’t Burn Them

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Jon Fuehring often made the point that when we’re practicing the path, the different factors—right view all the way through right concentration—they’re not simply right, they’re just right. Because a lot of the path requires balancing all kinds of things. One of the big issues is balancing right effort. Because on the one hand, you have to have a sense of urgency in the path, a sense of heedfulness that there’s work that needs to be done. As long as there’s any suffering in the mind, as long as there’s any defilement in the mind, you just can’t sit there and let it stay. But on the other hand, you need a sense of patience and contentment. Knowing that the path is going to take time, there are aspects that you need to be content with. The important issue is learning how to sort out which things you have to be content about and which things you have to have a sense of urgency about. One simple rule of thumb is that you have to be content with the raw materials you’ve got right here, right now—the state of your body, the state of your mind. That’s what you’ve got to work with. It may not be in the state that you want, but this is what you’ve got to work with. What are you going to work with if you don’t work with this? So that’s an area where you have to be content. And if working with it is going to take time, you have to be patient. But you don’t say, “Well, I’m just going to stay content where I am and leave it at that.” That doesn’t work at all. I was reading a Dharma newsletter last night. Someone was talking about the Four Customs of the Noble Ones. You may know of them. The first three are contentment. You’re content with whatever food you have, whatever clothing you have, whatever shelter you have. You don’t exalt yourself or anything. You don’t exalt yourself or disparage others over the fact that you’re content and other people are not content. But then the Dharma newsletter went on to say that you have to be content with where your meditation is. And that’s not what the Buddha said at all. He actually said you want to delight in developing and to delight in abandoning, which is something else entirely. You want to delight in developing good qualities. You want to delight in developing skillful qualities in the mind. You want to delight in abandoning the unskillful ones. That means you take delight in the work. And whatever you can do, whatever you can change, you try to do it, changing it for the better. And when you find that you can, okay, you take some delight in that. And if you can’t change it right away, you take delight in the fact that at least you’re on the right path. Sitting here meditating with a lousy state of mind is much better than not meditating at all, because that just allows the lousy state of mind to fester. The mind refuses to settle down. Try to pull out a little bit and watch it. It’s okay. This is what an untrained mind is like, and this is what a rebellious and unruly mind is like. And it’ll chatter along, but you don’t chatter with it. Just watch it, watch it, watch it. And at some point it’s going to reveal a little something about itself. And the simple fact that you’re not going along with it, that’s an accomplishment right there. If you can at least have some sense of the breath in the body, that’s helpful as an anchor. If you’re content with the situation that you’ve got to work with, this is the raw material you have. But your purpose is not just to stay here. Your purpose is to understand. If the raw material is not good, okay, what’s not good about it? But where are the good potentials within the raw material? You look for those. In some ways it’s like being a policeman casing a joint. You look for the criminals as they go about their activities. You may not be in a position to catch them yet, but you keep an eye on them. At some point they’ll reveal themselves. So you need that kind of patience, you need that kind of watchfulness. But again, you have to be content with what you’ve got. Another analogy is like being a good cook. Some cooks have to get only the best ingredients, and only then can they make good food. A really good cook can walk into a kitchen, look at whatever they’ve got in the pantry, whatever they’ve got in the refrigerator, and make something good out of it. I have a student who was a cook. One time they had a fixed menu for that place where he was working, and one of the items on the menu was asparagus soup. It turned out they had a lot more people coming than they had anticipated. They were running out of asparagus soup. So he drove everybody else out of the kitchen and said, “I don’t want you to watch me.” So what he did was he went into the garbage pail and got all the asparagus peelings, put them in a blender and made a nice white sauce. The soup he ended up with was actually better than the original soup. But you couldn’t tell the people out there eating that they were eating stuff out of the garbage pail. That’s the kind of attitude you want to develop as a meditator, that you can work with garbage. If you’re patient enough and you have enough ingenuity, and if you watch carefully enough, you will figure out how to get past the garbage and actually turn it into something good. The best meditators are not those for whom everything goes smoothly all the time. They’re the ones who’ve had to put up with difficulties. They’ve had to learn to observe the mind when it was difficult, learn to find a way around it. I noticed this many times with the John Furing students. Some of them came and they’d get their minds to settle down very quickly and have visions of one thing or another. Some of the other meditators in the room were jealous. But as John Furing pointed out, those are the ones he was concerned about for the times they would sit down to meditate and their minds wouldn’t settle down quickly and then be at a total loss and often give up, thinking, “Well, I was just kind of hit or miss,” and never figuring out that there was a pattern of cause and effect. The ones, he said, who would be the more solid meditators are the ones for whom it was not easy and had to figure things out. The one thing he was concerned about there was that they’d get discouraged before they’d figure things out, thinking that they were hopeless or that they had no talent as meditators. But this is one of those areas where, if you stick with it, you can’t help but figure things out. After all, it is your mind, and it is your sense of happiness, your sense of well-being. So you’re not being assigned a duty that’s irrelevant to your well-being. Or you have no way of gaining access to the data. The data is right here, and it’s something immediately relevant to the state of your life, the state of your mind, the state of your body. So you watch what you’ve got. And when you notice an opening, you go for it. And when the mind does settle down, you don’t want to just wallow in it. This is one area where you still have work to do. So many people, after they’ve struggled and struggled and struggled, finally get the mind to settle down and they just want to lay back and luxuriate in the stillness. The stillness will last for a little while and then it’ll go. Once it finally does settle down, again, this is where the area of delighting in developing and delighting in abandoning comes in. You’ve got to learn how to develop that state of concentration so that it stays. That’s the next level of skill. What can you do to keep it balanced? What can you do to keep it going? Make that your challenge. How can you keep it going when you get up from the meditation? This is one area where you really see the difference between people who are dedicated to the meditation, those who aren’t, and the difference between those who are going to go far and those who will just kind of hang around. It’s how much you appreciate the stillness when it comes and how much you’re willing to do to preserve it. So that when you get up from the meditation you still try to keep it going. It’s like a bowl of oil you’ve got in your lap here. It’s filled to the brim. Some people, when they get up, they just let the bowl spill out. That’s it. The concentration is gone. Other people try to pick it up in such a way that they don’t drop anything. Not a drop comes out of the bowl. That’s the attitude you want to have at the end of the meditation. Keep it going as long as you can. When you start getting impatient about when the insight is going to come, it’s going to come in the act of preserving the concentration. Because as you try to maintain that concentration, other things will come up to disturb it. They’ll try to knock the bowl over. Those are the issues in the mind that you want to understand. And you won’t notice them unless you notice that they are spilling your bowl of oil. Right there you can see where your mind tends to slip away from the concentration. Okay, that’s your own personal defilement. There are ways of teaching meditation that try to fit everybody into the same factory. But the results are as interesting as what you see in most factories. Sausage factory, whatever goes into the house. Hot dog comes out hot dog. It’s not necessarily good for you. There is no one meditation technique that fits everybody. And you can’t do any of the ones that say, “Well, just do the technique and don’t think about it.” The whole thing, the whole point of the techniques, is that you’ve got something to think about, something to learn to master, something that raises questions, that sparks a curiosity. As your own personal defilements run up against the technique, you learn to use your own personal ingenuity in solving those problems. So the contentment is being content with the raw materials you’ve got, and the urgency is knowing that you want to do this skillfully. That means sometimes being very urgently patient, realizing this is going to take time. It’s like roasting coffee beans. If you just put them in the burner and light it up as hot as it’ll go, you get roasted beans, but they’re burned. Sometimes it requires a slow roast. You have to keep in mind when you’re trying to find the balance of just right effort and just right concentration, as you try to be urgently patient and patiently urgent. Because after all, you do want to do this well. It is an issue of your own true happiness. You can’t just go through the motions, or you can’t say, “Well, let’s get this done as quickly as possible so I can get on to the next issue in life.” This is something that requires all the good qualities of the mind. And the skill and the finesse you can develop in making them work.

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