Cooking Lessons

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If you’re really aware of the present moment, you realize that it’s not presented to you ready-made. You play a role in shaping it. Some aspects of the present do come from your past actions. As the Buddha said, you should regard your six senses basically as old karma. But the old karma is basically potentials for your present moment experience. As the Buddha also says, we employ fabrication, or sankhana, as a process of putting things together to create a sense of the body, a sense of our feelings, perceptions, thoughts. Even our consciousness of the senses as an intentional element. And so these fabrications that we basically prepare in the present moment, it’s like being a cook. You look in the pantry, you look in the refrigerator, and you may have a very limited range of ingredients or more abundant. Some of the ingredients may be good, some of them may be rotten. And it’s going to depend on your skill as a cook what you’re going to make out of them. And for most of us, we have very few skills, very few ideas and options available to us. There’s a scene in the comic book series, Asterix, where a group of women are getting together, people that Asterix has met in the course of his many adventures, not only in France, but also abroad. There’s one from Spain, someone from Italy. And a woman from England. And the women from France, Spain and Italy are talking about all their many skills that they can apply to cooking. And the woman from England says, “You know, for me, the best way of getting a good taste out of something is to boil it.” That was the range of her skills. So she’s going to eat pretty miserable food, just boiled stuff. That’s what a family will eat, boiled stuff. When there’s so many other ways that you can fix food. And the same with us. Sometimes we have a very limited knowledge or limited sense of what our options are. When anger comes, we feel either we have to express it, or else we bottle it up, suppress it, deny it, and then it’s going to explode. And if it doesn’t explode, it’s going to make us sick, or we’re going to feel depressed. Nothing seems to have any meaning. And the voices in the mind say, “Nothing is worth anything. Nothing that you could try to do would make any difference, so why bother?” And again, you either deny that voice, push it out of the way, and it comes back, or you give in to it. And yet there’s so many other things you can do with these emotions. This is why the Buddha teaches us new ways of fabricating the present moment. When he talks about fabrication and dependent co-arising, it comes down to three types. Bodily fabrication, verbal, mental. Now on the macro scale, bodily fabrication refers to any bodily action. Verbal to any verbal action. Mental to any mental action. The kind of karma that would lead you to have good or bad. Experiences in the future. But on the micro level, bodily fabrication is the in and out breath. Verbal fabrication is how you talk to yourself. Mental is feelings and perceptions. Feelings are feeling tones of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. Perceptions are the labels you apply to things to identify what they are, what they mean, what value they have. And the Buddha is telling us there are lots of different ways that you can use these fabrications. He even tells us how to breathe. Breathe, he says, aware of the whole body. Breathe in a way calming the body, calming the effect on the body. Breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of pleasure, gives rise to a sense of rapture. Breathe in a way that makes you sensitive to mental fabrications, and then calming their effect on the mind. Breathe in a way that makes you sensitive to the mind, that gladdens the mind, steadies and concentrates the mind, releases the mind from its burdens. That’s just the breath. That’s for mental fabrications. The way you talk to yourself. Direct a thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts to a particular topic, and then you evaluate it. You make comments on it, you ask questions about it. You can write whole stories about it. He gives you advice on how to talk to yourself. That’s your feelings. Again, he teaches you how to promote what he calls feelings not of the flesh. Most of our feelings are physical, come willy-nilly. But there are certain feelings that you can actually create for yourself. There’s a sense of what he calls “annunciate grief.” When you think about how much work you’re going to have to do to get further on the path, to get to the goal, it actually encourages that. Not to think of it in a way that gets you discouraged, but to remind yourself there is a goal and it’s worth working toward. That’s your pleasure not of the flesh, equanimity not of the flesh. Those have to do with concentration. So the Buddha’s giving you lots of ideas for how to develop your cooking skills here in the present moment. So that regardless of what’s coming up in the pantry, what you’re going to find in the refrigerator, you can make good food out of it. Like that Vietnamese chef who said give me a good bottle of fish sauce and I’ll make good Vietnamese food out of anything. That’s one of the reasons why we practice, is to expand our range of, even our conception of what’s possible, and to help us develop these new skills. You notice a lot of them have to do with meditation itself. You’re focused on the breath coming in and out. That’s bodily fabrication. You’re talking to yourself about the breath, whether it’s comfortable or not, and what you can do to make it comfortable. Once it’s comfortable, what you can do to maintain that sense of comfort. And then when you can maintain it, how you spread it around the body. How you can use it in different ways in the body. Then to settle down, there has to be a feeling of ease that you created through the breath and also through the way you talk to yourself and your confidence that this is something worth doing. And then there’s the perceptions. Your perceptions of the breath, your perceptions of why it’s worth meditating. To give yourself encouragement. To figure out which perceptions help the breath flow more easily through the body. Because if you push it too much, you can create headaches. And if you’re pushing it, it’s not really breath. It’s the liquid element of the body. You’re pushing the blood around. You’re pushing the little tiny muscles in your blood vessels. Think instead of breath as energy. Energy can go through anything. So wherever there’s a sense of blockage, a sense of tightness, think of it opening up. And just hold in mind the perception that the breath can go through. So the Buddha’s giving you a sense of the different skills you can develop. And here as we’re meditating, we’re getting in touch with some really useful ones. That you can use, say, when anger comes or depression comes. When anger comes, you can remind yourself there are other options besides suppressing it, denying it, or exploding. You can breathe through whatever tension you feel in the body or in the breath. Because one of the reasons we feel we have to get the anger out of our system is because the body feels uncomfortable when we’re angry. And you feel you’ve got to push it out. So you push it out in your thoughts, in your words, in your deeds. And in doing things you’re really going to regret. So you remind yourself you can breathe through the tension. You can breathe through the tightness. You can breathe through that sense of blockage. And you can talk to yourself. Sometimes people ask me, when you’re doing meditation you’re supposed to engage in direct thought and evaluation. How do you do that? Well, you’re doing it all the time already, the way you talk to yourself. Simply you’re learning how to talk to yourself in better ways. So remind yourself you have better ways of talking to yourself. You have better ways of perceiving the situation. The important thing is that you open your mind to other possibilities. You have other options. The same with the depression. When you’ve been pushing, pushing, pushing against something that seems to be totally resistant. You get to that point where you think, well, maybe nothing’s worth doing at all. Remind yourself, okay, there are some things that you cannot affect. But that doesn’t mean there’s nothing in the world that you can affect. But there’s nothing in the world worth doing. Learn how to use different perceptions. Talk to yourself in different ways. Breathe in different ways. I know someone, one time, had a very bad case of manic depressive disorder. And when his depressive states were coming on, he had this feeling of a big weight in the body. And he said, push, push, push against the weight. He got discouraged and just gave up. Well, you can’t push against things like that, but you can breathe. Breathe through them. Sneak the breath through them. This is why it’s so important that your meditation gives you a sense of expanded options. All too many meditation methods say, well, you can’t do anything, just watch what’s coming up. We’re going to have some equanimity. Don’t engage in any desire to change. Now we burn off the old karma. Well, as the Buddha said, karma is not something you burn. And equanimity itself is a kind of karma. So you’re not escaping karma just by putting up with things. You’ve got all these options. You can breathe in different ways. You can talk to yourself in different ways. You can apply different perceptions. And the Buddha’s encouraging you to make the most of those opportunities. Expand your options. You’ll be a better and better cook of your experiences. So that no matter what is in the pantry, no matter what is in the refrigerator, you can serve up something good.

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