

Cooking Food for the Mind

December 11, 2007

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 try to learn how to make good food, now to nourish the mind so that its good qualities get strengthened.

So as you're meditating, you can think of yourself as a cook. You're preparing food for the mind. You're both the cook and the eater. As a good cook, there are two things you've got to think about. One, is the food going to taste good? If you don't prepare tasty food for the mind, it's going to start looking for food in other places. And two, 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 use it as a kind of medicine. When you're feeling feverish or coming down a cold, there are certain kinds of food they'll have you eat. As a meditator, you want take the same approach: See what the mind's illnesses are right now and figure out 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 of the food that you gain simply in consuming it; and two, the long-term results, whether it's bringing your constitution into or out of balance.

One of the reasons we keep looking for pleasure, 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 food, you look to other people, you look to outside entertainments, all kinds of stuff, when you don't really need to. After all, 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 make food taste good by putting in MSG, which tastes good for a while, but after a while it starts to be 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. Part of being a good cook is getting good recipe books. This is what meditation instructions are all about: learning the basic skills, how to sauté, how to boil, how to barbecue, how to make sauces. The instructions are there so that you don't have to reinvent the Dhamma wheel every time you sit down to meditate.

The instructions also come with directions on how a particular type of meditation is good for particular type of problem—i.e., treating food as medicine. Your basic diet here is the breath. Fortunately, the breath has lots of variations, and of the many meditation exercises out there, it's probably the safest because there's not much content to the breath. It's basically a feeling, a sense of energy. But to keep it from getting dull, you have to realize that the energy in your body can be manipulated in all kinds of ways.

Ajaan Lee gives some basic instructions in his Method Two, 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, with the realization that breath is in every part of the body. The property of energy is all around. If you pay close attention to it, you realize that it does different things in the body, moves in different ways, and after a while you began to gain a sense of which kinds of movement in the breath are good for you and which ones are bad. There are unhealthy ways of breathing, unbalanced ways of breathing. But sometimes an unbalanced way is precisely what you need, because your mind is often at 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, getting 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 you can focus on, other themes you can use, when you find the mind is out of balance. In other words, one, when it's not willing to stay with the breath, you have to ask yourself: 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 until it really hits 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 a very narrow focus in your mind, you have a way of giving yourself a reality check. In other words, get a reality check that opens your eyes, expands your vision, and then you can look at the fantasies and realize how blind they are.

Then you can do what Ajaan Lee did when he thought he wanted to disrobe. Think about it: What would it really be like? 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. You watch it die. And when it dies, you can come back to the breath.

But these side roads in the meditation are not the sort of things that you can go all the way with. You have to find a way of balancing them out.

There's the famous story of the monks who were meditating on the unattractiveness of the body and got so disgusted and so repulsed that they started committing suicide. The Buddha found out and told the remaining monks that when unskillful mind states come into the mind, you should 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 roads, until you get around a blockage in the main road. When you finally have done that work, you can come back to the main road and keep going.

When laziness comes up, you might want to think about death, realizing you have no idea when it's going to come. You've got work to do. And you've got the opportunity to do that work through the meditation now, so you'd better do it now, and not just put it off. Remind yourself how good it is you've got this opportunity, so you want to make the most of it.

But again, there is a problem with focusing on death, which is that it can start getting discouraging and depressing. It can sap your energy. So learn to think about it in a skillful way. This, too, is like learning how to be a skillful cook. There are some foods out there that can be good for you if you fix them the right way, but if you don't fix in the right way, they're actually poisonous. And 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 super superhuman. But there are tales in the Theragatha and Therigatha, and also on the lives of the forest ajaans, 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 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 isn't good. You learn how to use the good food and throw away the bad.

Another way to get over discouragement is to think about mistakes you made in the past but you learned from them, skills you've developed in the past that enabled you 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, you think about other people who've gained awakening: They can do it, well, they're human beings; you're a human being, too. If they can do it, so can you.

He says this is a skillful use of conceit, which has its place. But we know the 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 condition you've got, and then stop when you've got the body and mind back into balance. Learn how to choose your foods wisely and how to fix them well, gaining a sense of what you need in order to bring the body and mind back into balance, and recognize when they aren't in balance.

When you're feeling anger, there are always thoughts of goodwill, first having goodwill for yourself. Think of the old image of someone picking up a burning coal and throwing it at somebody else. Who's the first person who gets burnt? You're the one who gets burnt for sure. The same with anger: You burn yourself up to what purpose? If you really have goodwill for yourself, you wouldn't indulge in these things.

Of course, the reason we indulge in anger is because part of us 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 your friendships, you yourself don't look good, and you have trouble sleeping at night. If an enemy found out about this, boy, would he 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.

You start thinking of goodwill for yourself and then you start thinking about the other person. Often the people you're angriest with are ones whom 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. You begin to see that anger is just like lust: It comes from focusing on certain details and blocking out all kinds of other things. So you have to learn to look at things from both sides.

Once you're 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. 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 will destroy your stomach. So you feed on something cooling, 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 extend goodwill toward someone else, it doesn’t mean that you wish that they 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.

You’re not required to like the other person. You’re not required to like what they’re doing. You simply remind yourself that the issue of true happiness doesn’t have to involve conflict. It has to come from within. When you can think in this way, bring your thoughts back to the breath in the present moment and 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 that you don’t get bored with your cooking. At the same time, you learn to fix food that’s healthy, food that actually becomes medicine.

This way, the strengths of the mind can grow. Conviction in the Buddha’s awakening, persistence in the practice, mindfulness, concentration, discernment: These are all 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: 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 is that side to the meditation. But then there’s also the other side, the rules you have to follow in the cooking, especially in terms of finding a diet that’s balanced and can take a constitution that’s out of balance and bring it back into balance.

So your skills 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 an unhealthy one into a healthy one. At the same time, you’re learning how to make food that really tastes good, so that it’s enjoyable. It tastes good and it’s good for you. That’s a sign of a really good cook.