



Let Your Passion Cook

Mindful cooking is not detached or subdued, says Edward Espe Brown. It's cooking with your whole being engaged—mind, body, and emotions. And remember, it's better when you're *feeling your way in the dark* and asking *what is the most important point*.

AT A WEEKLONG MEDITATION SESSION one year, I think it was 1968, my teacher Suzuki Roshi lectured about how to practice Zen. “Zen,” he said, “is feeling your way along in the dark. You might think it would be better to have more light, to know where you are going, and to get there in a hurry, but Zen is feeling your way along in the dark. Then you are careful and sensitive to what is happening.”

Later I asked him (young man that I was), “Hmm, feeling my way along in the dark... Now that the program is over, what if we have a party?”

“If you do it with that spirit, it will be perfectly okay,” he said.

“Wonderful,” I thought, and started to get up from kneeling in front of him, when his voice brought my movement to an abrupt halt. “*The most important point is...*” and he paused, while I prompted myself to listen intently as the words slowly came out, “is to find out... what is... the most important point.” And I thought he was going to tell me! Only he had—and years later I continue to investigate this.

One of the places where I have studied this is in the kitchen. When we're cooking, what is the most

important point? As a meditator there are many ready-made answers: being mindful, being silent, watching your mind, being calm and peaceful. All well and good. But did anyone say, *preparing food*? Or, *feeling your way along in the dark*? We do well to study how we do what we are doing, and ask ourselves, *What is the most important point*?

“Be mindful in the kitchen while you work,” people often say. Perhaps useful, but unfortunately the word is overused, and often inaccurately. When people do not pick up after themselves, they are not being mindful. When they are gossiping while cooking, that's not mindful. In other words, when someone is not doing what they should, they are not being mindful. So *be mindful* becomes *do it right*, the way you are supposed to.

I'm not sure, but I think that being mindful is to experience your experience without judging good or bad, right or wrong. Being mindful in this fashion, you might notice dishes, crumbs, or scraps on what was formerly a clean surface—and this could be followed by choosing how to respond. Saying that the people who left those items were not mindful is another way of saying they are bad, that



it is wrong. That does not sound like mindfulness to me, which is to be aware without judging.

Do you want to prepare food, or to be mindful? And is there a way to do both? I'd like to offer alternatives to the usual explanation of "being mindful in the kitchen," but I would caution the reader to *feel your way along in the dark* and to investigate *the most important point*. In other words, find out for yourself how to make working in the kitchen a source of awakening.

When I asked Suzuki Roshi for his advice about working in the kitchen, he said, "When you wash the rice, wash the rice. When you cut the carrots, cut the carrots. When you stir the soup, stir the soup." Though very similar, this is not the same as, "be mindful in the kitchen," which makes it sound like you have two things to do: washing and being mindful, cutting and being mindful, stirring and being mindful. What would that mindfulness part look like? Probably a bit stiff, as your impulse will be to move slowly and carefully so that only a moderate amount of energy and emotion arises to meet the circumstances. In other words most people hear *be mindful* as *keep yourself in check*.

Yet what is magnificent and magical is finding out how to manifest the cutting of carrots with your whole body and mind; how to wash the rice with your eyes and your hands, connecting

consciousness with the senses and the world—not just going through the motions. This brings me to a pivotally important point. When you stop going through the motions and manifest the stirring of soup, alive in the present moment, emotions may surface. While some find this problematic and recommend dispassion, my suggestion is to invite your *passion to cook*.

Instead of tying yourself down so that nothing volatile arises, use what is vibrant and volatile—feelings—to energize your presence in the kitchen. Invite them to handle, stir, wash, touch, scrub, scour; invite them to see, smell, taste, and delight in the play. Cook's temperament is a passion for life: give it a field in which to practice—put it to work. If I were to cook only when I was most loving, kind, and benevolent, I would have starved long ago. I am not telling you to act out in the kitchen; my encouragement is to turn afflictive emotions, as well as enthusiasm and exuberance, into something edible and nourishing—food.

So along with mindfulness, *washing the rice when you wash the rice* is putting more emphasis on concentration, focus, attention, and energy. These actions rather blend together: Prepare food! Make it happen! Wash, cut, cook, taste, savor. Gather yourself, as many disparate parts as you can muster. Zero in on the activity and how to do it easily, effectively, effortlessly (not just going through the motions). Give your attention to observing and perceiving rather than giving out directives and enforcing rules. Let your life-force bloom and sparkle. *Interact*. Study how to use your body to do the work of cooking.

This kind of instruction accords with the oneness of practice and realization. When you make food you are actualizing the fundamental point. You are making food *real*. It's not just talk; it's not just a head trip—we can eat it.

Engage in what you are doing. Zen Master Dogen's advice is to *let things come and abide in your heart. Let your heart return and abide in things. All through the day and night*. To engage is to meet and connect, and out of that meeting and connecting, to respond. Responding from the heart, your implicit intention is to bring out the best. This is learning to relate with the things of this world and your own body-mind, rather than seeking to hide out in a place where you don't have to relate with anything. There are recipes to follow in order to get it right and gain approval. There are no recipes for telling you what your heart knows, and precious little workable advice for trusting your heart rather than your head. You choose to do it, and practice finding your way in the dark.

Manufactured products say, "I'm quick. I'm easy. You won't have to relate with me at all. Put me in the microwave and I'll be there for you, just the way you want me to." Recipes say, "Do what I tell you, and everything will be okay—you too can make masterpieces (and if it's not going to be a masterpiece, don't even bother)." To engage with the world is to study what to do with a potato, a carrot, cabbages, and bell peppers. What to do and how to do it. Are you *in the dark* yet?

Touch with your hands, see with your eyes, smell with your nose, taste with your tongue: let things come and abide in your heart, let

Arugula Salad with Avocado and Cashew Nuts

Arugula delights me with its *meaty* tenderness and its pungent flavor of mustard or radish. Here it is offset with the creamy avocado and crunchy cashews. Serves 4.

- 1 bunch arugula
- ½ cup cashew nut pieces
- 4 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 tablespoons balsamic or fig vinegar
- Salt and pepper
- 1 avocado

Prepare the arugula: cut crosswise into 2-inch lengths and sort out and discard the stems. Wash and spin dry the leaves. Set aside. Roast the cashew nuts in a dry skillet until lightly browned.

Toss the arugula with the olive oil, then with the vinegar and 2 to 3 pinches of salt. Grate on some pepper. Slice the avocado and toss half of it in with the greens. Place the remaining half on top and sprinkle on the cashews. Delicious!

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Cook's temperament is a passion for life—put it to work.

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your heart return and abide in things. Your capacity for cooking will grow and develop from your devotion to being in the dark, not knowing what to do, but carefully finding your way. You enter the kitchen and become intimate with cooking through cooking. You begin to trust your own aesthetic, and your close experiencing of cooking (and the sometimes uncomfortable feedback from others) starts to inform your aesthetic further.

After a number of months as the cook at Tassajara Zen Center, I went to Suzuki Roshi with another problem: “How do I get my fellow workers to practice the way they should?” I explained to him that I was endeavoring to practice his instruction to *wash the rice*, but that others in the kitchen often came late to work, disappeared for long bathroom breaks, and that when they opened their mouths, their hands stopped moving. “How do I get them to really practice?”

Roshi did not say, “Tell them to be more mindful.” He listened attentively, as his nods punctuated my litany with what I took as confirmation: Yes, I know, it's hard to get good help these days. He seemed so completely sympathetic. When I finished speaking, he paused for a bit, then startled me by saying: “If you want to see virtue, you'll have to have a calm mind.”

“That,” I protested to myself, “is not what I asked you.” I had something new to study.

How will you survive the kitchen? Make it through the fire? One key I found is not to calm my mind first and *then* look for virtue, but simply to look for virtue. There it is. What you look for—you'll get more of it. When you look for fault, you'll find it. I started looking for virtue.

Seeing virtue encompasses two aspects: the relative and the absolute. When you taste what you put in your mouth, you may notice sweet or sour, earthy or sunny, and along with these relative characteristics you can sense something essential, something from beyond. This something is not a thing. Go ahead and taste it—the virtue inherent in your careful, attentive, receptive experiencing of the moment. When your awareness is *in the dark*, and you are *opening* your perception, you can also taste your own inherent goodness and the virtue of others working with you. You may meet sincerity, kindness, wholeheartedness, vulnerability, grief, anxiety, determination, stubbornness. And you may meet mind itself: vast and spacious. Awesome!

You can shift your effort, shift your attention. From doing it right, aiming to gain approval, you shift to meeting and working



with the ingredients at hand. Looking to see what is available, you dream up what to do with the ingredients, while honoring their virtue. Our ordinary effort is to dream up a picture of how we want things to be, and endeavor to make it come true. Now, in the dark, you feel your way along, and your wisdom flashes: a salad, a soup; the virtue of spinach, apple, and walnut speaks to you. The body comes alive, because you are *doing* something. Yes, it's good to stop and sit and allow the usual impulses for motion an opportunity to move inwardly instead of outwardly—beautiful work there. Yet hands love to be hands. You give them life by allowing them to find out how to *do* things—how to wash and cut, stir and knead, ladle and mop. Your consciousness comes out of its nest or den in the head and finds its way into activity. These are the hands that have an eye in the middle of the palm which can see and connect with the object of touch. In this connection is health and healing—you are learning to work with the virtue of things, and receive the blessings of being human.

Everybody knows that cooking can be stressful. When your awareness becomes overwhelmed, stop for a few moments and make a mental (or even written) checklist of what needs to be done. Revise your list in accordance with reality: how much time and energy you have, and what is the one thing to do next, so that you can give that one thing your undivided attention. When stressed, *stop* and *check*, before proceeding step by step.

As Suzuki Roshi mentioned, “When you are in the dark, you don't know where you are going, but when you carefully feel your way along, where you find yourself will be okay.” To your health and happiness, joy and well-being, in the kitchen and out. Let's taste the blessings of the moment. ♦

EDWARD ESPE BROWN is author of *The Tassajara Bread Book* and *Tassajara Cooking*, which were seminal books in the movement toward healthy cooking and eating. His new book is *The Complete Tassajara Cookbook*, an updated collection of recipes and writings.