



The Art and Artlessness of Cooking

It seems that, for our entire lives, we are constantly both cooking things and being cooked, doing things and being transformed. The ingredients of our lives come to us each day, and through our actions, deeds, and thoughts, we determine how they will be best served. Each day has the potential for becoming either a rich banquet or a quick snack, depending on what we bring to the table.

Zen priest and cookbook author Edward Espe Brown says that there are essentially two styles of cooking (and of living your life). You can select a recipe or plan and then search out all the ingredients you'll need in order to produce the desired results, or you can gather what you have on hand and creatively construct something wonderful by using sincerity, spontaneity, surprise, and invention. You can, in other words, proceed with your own activity by "listening" to the ingredients and following accordingly.

There is an artistic and inventive quality inherent in the process of changing groceries into ingredients and then into food. But sometimes, something interferes with this process. Many types of cooking try to mask the natural qualities of the ingredients, and their true flavors become lost.

Each thing has its own original taste, yet it can be overwhelmed by the other things around it. The same is true of us.

Arguably, the most important student position in any Zen community is that of *tenzo*, or senior cook. This position is one that requires responsibility and dedication. And the caring and sincerity of this individual have a wide effect on the well-being of all other members of the community. Dogen was careful to articulate special instructions about this office, and his *Instructions to the Tenzo* has been widely translated and made available to students. Dogen's statements on cooking can extend into every single activity of daily life. Through his eyes, we discover the intimacy of cooking, and of being cooked.

Cooking for yourself or for others is nothing less than sharing your life. It gives you the opportunity to offer something of yourself to the world. Whether you are preparing a simple sandwich or salad, or spending hour after hour in more complex food preparation, you can enjoy the experience of giving. Even when you're alone, the aroma of a good soup steaming in the kettle adds nourishment and well-being to the entire household. As the poet Santoka (1882–1940) said, "The warmth of the food passes along from one hand to another." Each crumb of bread, each peppercorn, each bean, offers itself and is passed along to all living beings. These are the things that keep us all alive.

It is surprising how distanced many of us have become from our food. We seem to have a need for distraction even while we eat. We lose ourselves in music or conversation. When we sit in a restaurant alone, we prefer to have a newspaper or book to keep us company. We avoid looking at others. We feel an awkwardness in relating to the things we consume. We prefer that they be anonymous, coming to us fully prepared, without any hint of origin, and that they look delightful. Beyond that, we have no

relationship with them. We are barely involved in what is certainly one of life's most intimate acts.

Cooking gives you the opportunity to meet the things you eat. You can touch each carrot or olive and get to know its smell and texture. You can feel its weight and notice its color and form. If it is going to become part of you, it seems worthy, at least, of acknowledgment, respect, and thanks. It takes much time and care in order for things to grow, and many labors are needed to bring these ingredients to the kitchen. There is a lot to be grateful for that takes place between the wheat field and the dumpling.

The Zen poet Ryokan (1758–1831) spent much of his life performing the ritual begging-practice known as *takuhatsu*. He would present himself at the gates and doorways of his neighbors with his rice bowl in hand. In this way, he received nourishment from the community while offering himself in return. One day after returning to his hut, he wrote, "In this one bowl, there is rice from a thousand households." When you prepare a bowl of vegetable soup, you are preparing the soup "of a thousand households." You are united with the farmers who grew the vegetables and the workers who built the roads to deliver them. You are assisted by those who manufactured the utensils and those who constructed the stove. The list is endless. And the soup, itself, will nourish not only you and your friends but all those you are yet to meet. As Suzuki Roshi said, "Preparing food is not just about yourself and others. It is about everything!"

The act of serving food to others is one of utmost giving and intimacy. You share your food, your life, your time, and your experience with someone else. This kind of giving is well beyond the bounds of any kind of merit or approval one could hope for. It is complete in itself. It is its own reward.

At many temples and Zen centers, before meals, food is offered to all buddhas, hungry ghosts, animals, and beings of other realms. These small offerings are known as *saba*, or spirit offerings, and are given with great sincerity, with no expectation of recognition. They are placed carefully aside, as they would be when put before visiting guests. (There is even an old senryu [a form of poetry related to haiku] that says, "The new priest, in charge of money, is extra careful about the food offered to buddhas.")

Outside the temple walls, we find ourselves living in the land of the one-minute meal. The advertisements brag about the speed in which a "hearty meal" can be prepared. In the fast-food restaurants, we wolf down our food and ogle color photographs of an even wider array of items, eating one thing while wishing for another. It's an amazing job of salesmanship and conditioning. It's also a wonderful example of something needing to be corrected. As we know quite well, when we have one thing while wishing for another, we lose both. Again, somehow, we have lost contact with our own act of eating. At home, we eat while watching television. We seek diversion. We need to be entertained or to be distracted from this immediate and life-preserving act.

In Zen practice, there is a formal style of taking meals known as *oyoki*. This is eating reduced to its most fundamental. Everything needed is held in a small, self-contained package; small bowls that fit inside one another, a few simple utensils for eating and bowl cleaning, and a couple of pieces of cloth are all that's needed. The ritualized forms for receiving the food,

for eating, and for cleanup have all been handed down from teachers to their students for centuries. The simplicity of movement allows students to give their entire attention to the act of sharing in the meal. Eating this way demands a certain concentration. There is nothing to come between the food and the act of eating. Students express gratitude to all those who grew and gathered this food and prepared it for their benefit, and to those who serve it as well. The vast majority of these providers are people who will never be known to them: the ones who planted the seeds, made the water pipes, and so on. The foods themselves have grown and prospered from generation to generation. There is a Buddhist dining hall verse for such an occasion:

Innumerable labors brought us this food.

We should know how it comes to us.

Receiving this offering, we should consider.

Whether our virtue and practice deserve it.

Desiring the natural order of mind, we should

Be free from greed, hate, and delusion.

We eat to support life and to practice

The way of the Buddha.