

No Recipe

cooking as spiritual practice

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sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

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Love and Blessings to the Cooks!

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1

THE WAY OF THE KITCHEN

Actualizing Sacred Space



The position of tenzo
(head cook) requires
wholehearted practice.

ZEN MASTER DÔGEN



I Will Always Be with You

I will always be with you.

SUZUKI ROSHI

In 1965 I met Shunryu Suzuki Roshi and began practicing Zen with him and others at the San Francisco Zen Center, which in those days was located on Bush Street in the city's Japantown. Though he died in 1971, I continue to follow his way and share his teachings. It is important, he said, to meet someone as sincere as you.

And he wanted you to blossom: "You think that I am the teacher and you are the student—that is a mistake! Sometimes the teacher is the student; sometimes the student is the teacher."

Once after a conversation in his cabin at Tassajara, he hugged me, which had never happened before. While he was holding me, he said, "I will always be with you." My body turned to light dancing up and down where my spine had been, and in the absence of a body, gauging my height was no longer a possibility. So I continue to sense his presence here with us—his voice, along with my voice, coming through me as I write. Most of my Zen teachers have departed from this earth, but they are living in the sky, in the waters of Tomales Bay where I sit writing, in the seagulls and pelicans. I invoke their presence here as well. We are in this together.

In 1966, after a year of practicing at the San Francisco Zen Center (most days going to meditation at five o'clock in the morning), I found a job at Tassajara Hot Springs, then a summer resort in the Los Padres National Forest, east and south

of Carmel, California, where Bob and Anna Beck hired me to wash dishes. That summer the cooks Jimmie Vaughn and Ray Hurslander taught me to bake bread, along with the rudiments of cooking. Halfway through that summer, Ray quit, and the Becks asked me if I would take his place.

At twenty-one years old, the calm dishwasher became a temperamental chef. You know you're temperamental when you become the subject of group meetings called for that purpose alone: What do we do about Edward? And of course the primary responsibility for *doing something* falls to the would-be chef: Do you want to keep your job or not?

That fall Tassajara was bought by the San Francisco Zen Center, and I was invited to be the head cook, or *tenzo*, for the new, monastic-style community. Today it is pretty much impossible to understand how hard we worked. Several years ago, one of the Tassajara guest cooks asked me if I was ever a guest cook there. "Before you were born, yes, I was one of two guest cooks, and along with being a guest cook, I was the head cook, the head of student food, and the baker." Now each is a separate position, with four guest cooks and two bakers (and there are perhaps twice as many guests).

It just doesn't compute, unless you were there, how physically exhausting it was. If I was to sit down in the afternoon, I would fall asleep. Because of lack of staffing, it was often impossible to take days off, so I would work two or three weeks or a month without a break. And we were working in a small temporary kitchen while we built the new kitchen by hand—stone walls three-feet wide in the ground, eighteen-inches wide up the sides. We did construction ourselves in those days; now the Zen Center hires crews to come in and complete the building projects. The students meditate.

Most cooks have experienced incredible exhaustion, especially at the start. One chef friend of mine, who now heads

a large dining room for a hotel in Südtirol, once spent three days working for an Austrian catering company in Dubai. Three fourteen-hour days were spent peeling baby carrots. “It’s not natural,” he deadpanned. “After two or three hours, you do not know what to do—whether to cry, scream, rage, or collapse—and you just go on.”

When I was laboring in the kitchen at Tassajara, our teachers always said that work was a spiritual practice, not different from sitting in meditation. This was challenging to comprehend, yet I took their word for it and decided that I would cook as though I were doing spiritual practice—that is, I would put my whole heart into it and follow Rōshi’s teachings as best I could. Though dented by events, I survived. Time spent cooking saved me from some of the tortuous hours of sitting cross-legged in the zendo with painfully throbbing knees.

Slowly I was learning how to work as though the space, the food, the bowls and pots, and the counters and shelves were sacred.



Entering Sacred Space

*Those without way-seeking mind will not have good results,
in spite of their efforts.*

ZEN MASTER DŌGEN

Working in the present can help shift one’s awareness from past hindrances and traumas. Awakening to the world of today, you work in sacred space. Space where you can learn and grow rather than be graded on your performance. Space where, even

before you start, you are loved and appreciated rather than seen as “less than.” Space where instead of doing what’s required (or else!), you generously offer your efforts for the benefit of family, of friends, for the benefit of what is larger.

What would make cooking a spiritual practice rather than mere work is cultivating a sense for what is sacred and doing your best to bring that alive in the world of the kitchen. Suzuki Roshi brought this to light by asking us, “What is your inmost request?” While some traditions seem to be rather specific about what is spiritual, here the sense is “to turn your light inward” and find out for yourself.

Please know I am not trying to tell you or anyone the right way to cook or to live—as though I knew better than you how to live your life. Each of us finds the way for ourselves. There is no recipe. If you’re interested in navigating your inner world and connecting your inner world with the outer world, then you may find some helpful material here. You’ll see pretty quickly.

Kitchen work tends to be demanding; as there is much to do and as (hungry) people want their food (already!), so much of my effort has been studying how to live in the moment—responding to its demands—with focus, integrity, and good-heartedness. This study has been informed by observing others skilled in the kitchen, reading books, listening to lectures, and most importantly awakening beginner’s mind—seeing what you can find out rather than aiming for great accomplishment. Especially engaging for me as a Zen practitioner have been the writings of Zen Master Dōgen, particularly his *Tenzo Kyōkun: Instructions for the Cook*. So I will be quoting him from time to time.

Poetry speaks to me as well, so certainly it finds its way into the book. Finding language that speaks to us is pivotally important in our lives. You’ll find out whether my language speaks to you and moves you on your life journey. When the

words from outside resonate as though they are from inside, you know you've found a positive connection. See what you notice.

I'm not particularly good at setting down rules or guidelines or producing orderly constructs, but if you take to the story, you might well find it enjoyable and engaging. If my words are not speaking to you, by all means set them aside and find some that do—or write your own.



Making Sacred Space Manifest

Once when Pao Fu and Ch'ang Ch'ing were wandering in the mountains, Pao Fu pointed with his hand and said,

“Right here is the summit of the mystic peak.”

Ch'ang Ch'ing said, “Indeed it is. What a pity.”

CASE 23, THE BLUE CLIFF RECORD

Entering the sacred space of the kitchen, we don't know what will happen. We shift from the preoccupation of being in control to the focus of being in connection. Perhaps we breeze, our sails filling with gracious winds: flavorful food appears, and we hum with satisfaction and pleasure. Perhaps we flounder: the rice crunchy, vegetables mushy and dull-colored, the food outspoken in its refusal to match our pictures of delicious or even acceptable. So it is that we are in the soup, and while we strive to nourish ourselves and others with food, we do not always succeed. There is so much to figure out, from a workable (whether simple or elegant) menu plan (that does not have everything coming out of the oven or too many dishes on the stovetop at the last minute), to cooking times. There is so

much to do—shopping, unloading the car, putting things away, cooking, cleaning up, the compost, trash, recycling—and so much to handle—ingredients, pots, pans, knives, dishes, leftovers, spills. One remembers Psyche given the task of sorting out a huge pile of wheat, barley, poppy seeds, chickpeas, lentils, and beans and how aided by an army of ants, she completes the assignment overnight. It's her ant-mind that she never knew she had.

In sacred space, help is available—and we learn to ask for it.

Speaking from the perspective of my Zen background, doing spiritual practice in the kitchen means taking up the task of creating this sacred space. Of course, sacred space is here all the time, as Pao Fu points out in the introductory quote. It's right here, so we do not literally create it as much as we embody it or practice it, so that our life is infused by it. We practice showing up.

We start by acknowledging as Ch'ang Ch'ing did, "Indeed it is." As different traditions have various sensibilities about what constitutes sacred space, along with how to acknowledge it and bring it alive—ways which are often powerful and trustworthy—I do not mean that Zen is the only way or the best way to do this, but simply that it is one you may find useful, as I have.

Which space are you walking in, working in? Ordinary space or sacred space? In ordinary space, we often feel caught up in circumstances as we face the demands of the day, which come along with performance standards or expectations, evaluations, assessments. We may sense that we are being judged, and we anxiously await the latest edition of our ratings. We wonder, can we get to a better place than here, where things seem so uncertain and unsafe, where struggle and stress seem constant? One answer people arrive at, of course, is to stay out of the kitchen—in fact, far, far away!

In ordinary space, we confront what seem to be established criteria for what is better and what is worse. Nothing lasts, so we remain at the mercy of shifting circumstances. Although our cooking skills may improve and we may receive more compliments, we know that our ratings could plummet at any moment.

In a further story about the summit of the mystic peak, Zen Master Joshu was asked, “How do I get to the summit of the mystic peak?” and his response was, “I won’t say.” When the monk pressed him, asking, “Why won’t you say?” Joshu said, “If I told you, you would go right on thinking that you are now on level ground.”

Do we live in a profane world, or do we say, “Yes, indeed, sacred space is right here”? Where are we? Awakening the mind that *seeks the way* to learn, to grow, to study, to investigate, already we are shifting into sacred space. Something could come through us.

Instead of aiming to go somewhere else, where everything is so much better, the Zen imperative is to recognize that the sacred is here by practicing, living, cooking in the way of sacred space. *No Recipe* is about how to do this.

This is not a book giving you instructions for how to make improvements in the everyday world or how to produce food that comes out the way it should (though it might), but one offering teachings for bringing alive your own source of sacredness. You’ll find that your health, happiness, and well-being are less dependent on performing to or surpassing the outer standards of acceptability and more about trusting, knowing, and sharing your innate true nature. You yourself are worthy, wise, and compassionate, and you can bring that to life in the kitchen and out and about. You *practice making sincere and wholehearted effort*. You *do not think with ordinary mind*, and you *do not see with ordinary eyes*. You *let things come and abide in your heart and let your heart return and abide in things*.



Remembering We Have Choice

In sacred space, we have choice. Cooking is a choice we may make. Eating out is another, along with microwave, take-out, table, couch. Some homes are without a cutting board and have only a dull paring knife for prepping. Pots may be scarred and pitted. Counters cluttered. Dishwashers full—are the contents washed or unwashed? Sinks precariously piled with plates and bowls, glasses, silverware, and discarded food. Pots with the debris of unserved food sit soaking for easy cleaning, which rarely occurs, as it's not that easy to put hands to work. Other kitchens are pristine because no one ever goes there.

We make choices. About what is worth caring for and tending to. Is the food? The space? The dishes? Are you? At times no cleaning utensils are to be found: no sponges, no brushes, no bristles. A choice to be elsewhere, where it's more pleasant. And where everything is done for you.

My daughter once rented a room in a house where even the packaging for the pizzas, which had been oven-baked, was strewn about. A choice to walk away. Stoves with only one burner that works—the landlord's not fixing it—or the utilities have been turned off and no burners are available. Off-putting aromas from the refrigerator. I've been in these kitchens. There's work to be done before even beginning to cook.

Another kitchen where layers of dust and grease have turned the counters black. You don't wash it clean but scrape it like old paint, literally chiseling up curls of accumulated grime. I've found an ammonia-based cleaner applied with elbow grease and the green abrasive side of the sponge work best for

removing the remaining residue—one sponge after another, as they become unusable.

Years of walking away. Years of doing the least possible to eat and be done. It's a choice. I will cook, eat, and walk away. I will not notice the grime. I will ignore what I've left behind. I am free. I do what I like. This is America. This is our world, where choice often moves in the direction of what appears to be easy and neglects the sacrifice necessary to bring forth the sacred.

The sacred is the world of spirit, the realm of the heart, which cannot be measured, bought, or sold. You offer what you have to offer because you *choose* to do so, not in order to gain accolades or accumulate people's gratitude or praise.

Our choosing may be conscious or unconscious, thoughtful or thoughtless, habitual or considered. We come by our style of choosing honestly, given our childhood experiences—that is, the unique template or model we received for how to function in this world. As we mature, we may come to realize that we could make new choices—that is, we have freedom, if we choose it!

And some of you—bless you—some of you are choosing to cook, to clean, to provide, to nourish. Sacred space doesn't come or go. It's been here all along, but when you do not practice the way of sacred space, you do not realize it. You do not know it. You can choose to be held in blessedness and spread blessedness with your efforts. You can work to acknowledge what matters.

On one hand, this is simply practical—how will you manage to have food available for placing in your mouth? On the other hand, you could be choosing to practice living in sacred space—that is, to make sacred the space you live in, the space where you are, where there is inherent worth beyond ordinary performance-based, bottom-line thinking.

Worth comes from your intention, your effort, your attention to manifesting it. In other words, along with the world's