

## The Most Important Ingredient

Some monks once asked the Buddha why the food offered by a particular lay person was so delicious and the Buddha replied that the food contained “the most important ingredient” which was love.

In the life of a community, a family, an individual, the active cultivation of this ingredient is paramount. Deeds of secret kindness - that which no one is ever going to know about, making offerings without strings and letting go of small irritations are all ways of doing this. One of my favourite ways of practicing this, which brings me great joy, is to rise before everyone else on some mornings and make something particularly nice for breakfast — to put all my undistracted attention into it and love. Letting go is love, doing a job thoroughly and to conclusion is love, going to meditation when you don't feel like it is love, the whole of the call to the monastic life is love. Rev. Master Jiyu stayed in her seat for all those years and cherished us - that was love.

It is common for people to regard despair, hate and fear as real and compassion and love as delusional. To practice Buddhism we go beyond ordinary and common points of view. In fact it is compassion and love that are the reality - no matter what happens around us or to us no one can take away our ability to try to respond from stillness and that too is love.

It is said in the Surangama Sutra, “No teaching that is unkind can be the true teaching of Buddha.”

Some may think that I am kidding or being metaphorical in what I write but I am in deadly earnest. If you ask what is the most important thing in preparing food you will be told: fresh ingredients, good pots and pans, organic vegetables, cookbooks, years of experience. . .

But I say, “Love”.

And I don't mean without effort - training always involves effort - “put your back into it!” as my father used to say.

Resist the urge to listen to the news on the radio at the same time. Pick up and put down with care everything you handle. Don't get in too much of a fluster. Don't disparage the ingredients or, and this is important, don't use something that you think has gone off just in order not to “waste”. I once didn't want to “waste” a bag of corn chips and ended up having to “waste” an entire casserole that I made with them. The chips turned out to be very stale and made the dish uneatable.

Get your ego out of the way when you cook - let go of notions, judgments and the critical, carping mind. And cook, with care and attention and love.

In gasshō,  
Kōten