

Vipassana of dishwashing

Everything is teaching us, even the kitchen

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Most of us do not like to wash dishes, even when we eat at home, as a couple or a family. But plates, bowls, cups, saucers, spoons, forks, pots, pans, woks, ladles, food-stained and used kitchenware, keep piling up after meals. Even when we eat from disposable containers and cutlery, we need to dispose of them. Even in monasteries, we need to wash up after a meal—unless we have female fans and male slaves waiting in line to wash for us. Anyway, this is a reflection on when we have to do the washing ourselves.

Kitchen secrets

The closest guarded secret about successful dishwashing is a library-like arrangement of kitchenwares that need to be washed. Plates should be piled together in descending order of size; cutlery should be put together in a to-be-washed pot or vessel of suitable size. It's best to wash the large items first. This clears up some vital space for placing washed items in a strategic manner.

Also never clog the washbasin with debris; clear it before washing. Otherwise, the pipes may clog up. Fortunately, in the HDB (Housing Development Board) flats, the pipings are set up in such a manner that we can easily unclog it. Then, again, we need to know how to do this, but this is too far away from the washbasin for me to write about.

Saving water

In water-scarce Singapore, we treat the tap and shower as sacred. We have a huge undisclosed national reserve of funds, and also numerous reservoirs of water, above and below ground. But much of our water still comes from Malaysia, for which we pay a pittance thanks to the contract that goes back to the colonial era.

But Malaysian politicians seeking easy mileage may raise this issue again, or worse, Malaysia herself, or rather Johor, the southernmost state, might run out of water, and stop supplying us water. So the kitchen-tap should only run when there is a real need for the washing.

Forks, spoon, knives

I find it most strategic, after washing the large pots and items, to go on to wash the cutlery. They are the smallest and most tedious items to wash. If not properly scrubbed, we will get food remains on them when we reuse them for our meals. This reflects poorly on the dishwasher: we are only human, not machine, after all.

There's a family secret in washing cutlery, too. We wash all the spoons first, or all the forks first, then knives, setting them aside separately. This allows them to be properly returned to their holders near our dining table for easy access.

I'm often just amazed at the amount of cutlery we use in a day's meals. We should contemplate eating with our hands as many traditional local Indians and Malays do. But it seems to be a dying art; then, there's Covid-19, and we have to keep our hands and ourselves really clean.

Don't look at dishes

One good tip to happy mindful dish-washing is never to look directly at the to-be-washed piles. Do not gaze too long at them anyway. Then, our unconscious will send commands to the preconscious, discouraging us: there's so much washing to do; it's better to work on the suttas or give Zoom classes to the world; you are a world teacher who is above such washing!

That's Mara's voice whispering to us to leave our own dirty karma uncleaned. The problem with unwashed crockery and cutlery is that, in the end, we have nothing to eat with. Then, we have to wash those items we direly need to eat with there and then. It actually takes away much of the joy of eating when we have to work while we are faintly hungry. (Please carefully consider the meaning of "faintly.")

Everything is teaching us

Most rookies dread washing the dishes, and when they are forced or feigned to wash, they do so as quickly as they can—to get done with it. This makes it a mundane chore. The idea, or vision, is to see it as "everything is teaching us." After all, we have used those items, and we need to have them washed and cleaned. It's not as bad as doing our toilets which is much more messy, and it is simply unthinkable (embarrassing to be sure) to write a reflection on toileting!

Dishwashing arhat

As I begin my dishwashing practice, I recall the arhat Cūḷa Panthaka and the meditation the Buddha taught him. He held a piece of clean white cloth on one palm, and with the other, he mindfully rubbed over it, reflecting, "Cleaning away ... Cleaning away ..." (*rajo'haranaṃ*).* After a while, he noticed that the once white cloth was now soiled. Reflecting on impermanence, with the ripening of aeons of good karma of Dhamma practice helping him, he attained arhathood.

To me, Cūḷa Panthaka is the patron arhat of dishwashing. He is also said to be dull to learning, having, in his past life, demeaned those who studied the Dhamma. He is a holy reminder to me to never demean learning the Dhamma or suttas—and dishwashing.

As I scrub and wash a dish or a spoon, I direct all my attention to where it is happening. "Washing away Washing away ..." It always works. They become clean and I am often happily surprised (with a slight disappointment) that all the dishwashing is over in such a (relatively) short time! The Dhamma is everywhere; everything is teaching us—when we are willing to learn.

Notes:

1. On the story of the arhat, Cūḷa Panthaka, see DhA 2.3/1:245.
2. On rajo'harāṇa, see **Vuṭṭha Vass'āvāsa Sutta** (A 9.11,4.5/4:376), SD 28.2a; SD 51.24 (2.5.4.3).

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