

Life: A Box of Cupcakes

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Ingredients:

*1.5 cups all purpose flour
3 tbsp cocoa powder
1 tsp baking soda
1 cup caster sugar
½ tsp salt
5 tbsp oil
1 tbsp vinegar
½ tsp vanilla essence
1 cup water*

Method:

- Preheat the oven to 180 degrees Celsius and grease an 8 in cake tin with oil and flour.*
- In a clean mixing bowl, sieve the flour, cocoa powder and baking soda*
- Add sugar and salt*
- Whisk the dry ingredients well*
- Separately mix the wet ingredients well*
- Add the wet mixture into the dry mixture and mix well till everything is combined into a smooth batter.*
- Pour the batter into the greased cake tin and bake for 30 minutes, or till an inserted toothpick comes out clean.*

Those who love baking know the joy of seeing coarse ingredients come together to give birth to a cake. I am a baker by profession and absolutely love baking. Every time I put a tray of cupcakes to

bake, I find myself staring into the oven to catch a glimpse of their gradual metamorphosis. I love to see them rise and wait to be the first one to catch their delicious fragrance. I am a hopeless addict; often baking cakes, brownies, and cookies, even when I don't have orders to dispatch. The simple pleasure of sitting at a table, enjoying cake and coffee, to talk to a friend about how the day was, evokes within me the joy of having spread some love in my own small way.

A forkful of chocolatey goodness allows you to forget worries, and drop boundaries; you simply enjoy the moment, you are in the present. Have you ever found yourself worrying about the past or the future when relishing a good piece of cake? Hahaha... I haven't.

Interestingly, though full of love, baking does not accommodate impulsive changes, additions and subtractions. In a more technical manner, baking requires accurate measurements, the right mixing techniques, and just the right temperature. If any one of these is either overdone or not followed, the baking project fails, and one needs to start all over again. As a child I'd see my mother make

apple pies. I would observe how she leveled each cup and each spoon; nothing was left to approximation or chance. The first time I baked a batch of chocolate chip cookies, I decided to add, with a lot of love and a pinch of enthusiasm, a little more butter and a little more sugar than the recipe called for. With a lot of effort and patience, I made small cookie dough balls, placed them on the baking tray, which I slid into the pre-heated oven. As I anxiously waited, I saw the extra butter leak from each dough ball, making it all into one big messy slab. When I removed it from the oven, I discovered that the flour had over-baked because of all the extra butter, and the sugar had almost completely caramelized.

It was a disappointment. I thought to myself, "Why is it a failure despite so much love and effort?" I would not give up. I had to bake all over again. And yet again I failed, though not as badly as the first batch, because I had reduced my impulse to add more butter and sugar. And so I tried a third time. By now it was late at night and I decided to stick to the recipe. And voila! This was a good batch of cookies. Sometimes, such trials lead us to understand

that it is not about impulse. Instead we must objectively recognize what is needed, the right proportion of ingredients - not more and not less, but just right.

When one day, early on his path towards enlightenment, the great Siddhartha Gautama, was said to be meditating on the banks of a river, he overheard a Guru teaching his disciple how to play a veena. He said, "If the strings are too tight, they will break and there will be no music. If the strings are too loose, also one cannot play music. There must therefore be the right tension."

Isn't this teaching relevant to my cookie debacle? Clearly, the ingredients need to be added in just the right proportion, the right tension - not more, nor less. With the right tension, and with the help of an oven, an apparently magical transmutation happens, to give birth to crunchy delightful cookies, from a mushy chaos of dough.

As I contemplated this magical process, I realized that baking, much like an alchemical process, required the use of 4 core elements: Earth (flour), Water (water), Air (yeast to capture air), and Fire (from the oven). When these elements work together in harmony, an inner alchemical change takes place to give birth to a new and better version of the raw materials, as if the process unleashed a higher, invisible potential.

Interestingly, ancient traditions universally speak of the human being also, as made up of the same 4 elements: Earth (physical

body), Water (vital energetic aspect that animates the physical body), Air (our emotions and feelings), and Fire (the mental plane comprising our thoughts and opinions). For a process of transmutation, whereby a human being is able to truly unlock his own invisible potential, each of these elements needs to be prioritized, harmonized, moderated. Just like the excess butter, by dominating every other ingredient in the recipe caused a disaster, we unknowingly create "recipe disasters" in our own lives on a daily basis. How often we are enslaved by our emotions or our biases, clouding our objective judgment of reality, causing us to act irrationally!

We are who we are today as a result of past experiences; some have built within us fear, some cause us to hold on to grudges, and others have made us hopeless. But we can't let our past define us. While each has contributed to molding us as we are today, we must not blame the past for our incapacity to deal with our demons today. If I had continued to bake cookies with the fear of a failed outcome I would never have been able to bake a half decent batch. Similarly, if we were to handle each circumstance with the same subjective filters and habits, we should not be surprised to find that we experience similar disappointing outcomes. We wonder how it is that we face the same problems again and again, whether in personal relationships, in the workplace, or elsewhere in our lives. And we usually look for external solutions to 'fix' the circumstances. In reality, the

disorder lies deep within us; we are driven by fears, grudges, jealousy, or insecurities. And until we moderate them, and add the vital ingredient of love to purify them, we are doomed to repeat failed recipes!

Love here does not refer to impulsive or emotional sentimentality. Instead it refers to a principle that comprises justice, harmony, and altruistic objectivity. By this it helps unite the various elements. It steers away from Rajas or Tamas, and aspires towards Sattva, enabling us to look at life objectively, from the point of view of what is truly needed, rather than through the subjective lens of biases, opinions, judgments, or emotions.

Furthermore, just as in baking, individual ingredients are mixed, kneaded and put through the grueling heat of the oven, so too we can use our circumstances and challenges to help us transform. We can look at these challenges and circumstances as the kneading, exercising each aspect of the human constitution, preparing it for a shift from a material point of view to the spiritual. It will allow the restructuring of our personalities. In doing so, life becomes a dialogue. Challenges become opportunities. And everything starts making more sense. It is as if we will have found the elixir of life, that secret ingredient which keeps us young, filled with wonder, and free of fears, filters and biases. Perhaps this is why we are here: to transmute, so as to make the world a better place, one cookie at a time. ★★