

Compassion in a Pita

Uri Kita

It's the height of summer. I leave my air-conditioned office to get lunch. It's so hot that my shadow is trying to hide in the shade under my feet. A bus passes. A car honks. Everyone is rushing. Maybe even faster in the summer.

My hunger takes me to Falafel HaNassi in central Carmel. The place is packed as usual. Behind the counter, Dror, the owner, hands off three falafels to a woman wearing a broad-brimmed hat, receives payment for two others, and begins working on two more for a couple of construction workers.

"Take a drink from the fridge," he tells a kid who seems to be looking for something. A second employee deals with a young woman, and when he finishes with her, I ask for the usual: "One falafel with all the extras. Yes, hot sauce. Yes, to eat here."

The pita is opened from the top. With deft movements, hummus is spread, tongs dart quickly through the salads from right to left, the warm falafel balls are arranged neatly on top, a final flourish of tahini is added like a signature, and my falafel is ready, wrapped in a paper bag on the counter.

Maybe one day I'll write a haiku about that first bite of a falafel. That moment when you look at the pita, calculate the ideal angle of attack, squeeze it slightly, compress your fingertips, rearrange a falafel ball before it falls, and then . . . the bite.

Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi: supreme and perfect enlightenment. Maybe just a bite of falafel?

I love watching people take this bite. Some close their eyes. Others stare at an indeterminate spot on the counter, somewhere between the salads and the bottle of curry sauce. Everyone feels it. It's one of those moments when our bodies actually take us for a brief foray into a spiritual zone. At that moment there is no inner or outer, no past or future, no thoughts. The perception of tasty or not only kicks in afterward.

But not at that moment.

After that first bite, it's just falafel again. I'm busy with mine. I survey the lay of the land to see how I can get through the crush for more hot sauce. Across the way, I see the young woman who'd been served ahead of me. She's battling with a torn pita and looks decidedly unhappy. Other customers are checking out the situation. The guy behind the counter also notices. He sets aside the portion he'd just begun preparing and then slowly, without a lot of questions, he takes her pita and tosses it in the bin.

"No big deal, maybe too much tahini," he says, almost as if talking to himself, all the while preparing her another falafel. "Here you are—*b'tayavon!*" (Bon appetit!).

The woman takes the second falafel and begins eating. I manage to get to the hot sauce.

Minutes later it happens again. The pita is in tatters, tahini is everywhere, and the same woman is standing despairing in the middle of the small restaurant with tears in her eyes. One by one the other patrons stop eating to watch, still hunched over their pitas. The two construction workers are watching in the mirror behind the counter. The quiet is so unnatural that the guy at the counter raises his eyes from the deep fryer.

"Your pitas are no good," the woman sobs. "It's fallen apart again!"

Someone clucks their tongue. The rest are silent. We all saw what happened the first time, and something is wrong, but it's not the pita.

This time, Dror, the owner, gets involved. He drops everything. The register drawer is left open.

"What happened, honey? Why are you crying?" he asks.

"It doesn't matter!" she says angrily. "Take it, I don't want it anymore!"

Dror doesn't give up. He reaches over the counter, takes the falafel and throws it in the bin, cuts a third pita in half, and grasps the salad tongs:

"Everything's all right, I'm with you now," he says to her. "Look at me. I'll put in whatever you want, but keep your eyes on me."

The woman raises her eyes and looks at him, mesmerized. We're also mesmerized.

"Hummus?" She snuffles a quiet "yes." "Tomato?" "No." "Pickles?" "Yes." "Salad?" "Yes, a little." "Hot sauce?" "No." She wipes her nose with the back of her hand.

Dror adds the falafel balls to the pita and the falafel is ready. Holding the bottle of tahini, he says: "Now, I'm putting just a little bit. Take the tahini with you and put as much as you want, but a little bit each time. Don't put on a lot at once because it makes the pita wet and it'll tear. OK?"

The woman nods her head silently. She grasps her falafel and heads out into the heat to find someplace to eat it, maybe further away from us.

With a collective sigh of relief, everyone gets back to eating their falafel. I finish, pay, and leave.

"Right, and what can I get for you, fella?" I hear Dror ask a new customer.

Thank you, Dror, for a lesson without teaching, a wordless Dharma conversation, and delicious falafel that's always fun to eat. ♦

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