



SACRED EATING RETREAT

Great Vow Zen Monastery

Eating is essential to our survival, our happiness, and our ability to become wise and loving.

Suffering also can come from eating if we are ignorant about the nature of hunger, satisfaction, and our potential to become awake.

Mindfulness is the key to becoming awake and free from suffering. Mindfulness means to be aware, to fill the mind with what is happening in the present moment.

The present moment is where we are truly alive.

The past is dead and the future is a dream.

The body is the key to awakening.

What is happening in the body is happening in the present moment.

Attention is energy. Where we direct our attention, energy flows. When we are absent from the present moment, when we eat and ignore, energy is blocked or drained from our life.

We can change the valence of our mind energy from negative to positive. One way we do this is through food. There is nothing wrong with this. However, if we do it unconsciously, we may get into trouble. If we do it with awareness, there will be a better outcome.

There are many other ways to change the mind's energy.

To be mindful of breath, of sounds, of touch, of taste, of smell, of movement, of temperature, of the stream of thoughts, is to rest in the present moment. Here we come alive and all things are restored to life.

MINDFUL EATING “WHEN EATING, JUST EAT”

- (1) Mindfulness is the most powerful tool for accessing the sacred aspect of eating.
Mindfulness is the best seasoning you can add to food.

*Mindfulness is deliberately paying attention, being fully aware of what is happening both inside yourself, in your body, heart and mind, and also outside, in your environment.
Mindfulness is awareness without judgement or criticism.*

- (2) Recognizing different kinds of hunger.

Eye hunger: “That sure looks good. I’m full, but . . . I could eat that.”

Mouth hunger: “I want more sensations, more sensations, different sensations!”

Stomach hunger: Growling, rumbling, empty or constricted feelings.

Body or cellular hunger: Unusual cravings. Sometimes faintness or fatigue --“pooping out.” Interestingly these disappear when you fast and there is new energy and clarity.

Mind hunger: This is composed of all the voices that talk about food, are triggered by the media, are afraid, critical, etc, and prevent us from JUST EATING.

Heart hunger: The intimacy that arises when we are preparing food for or eating with people we love. Also the intimacy with all the people and beings who bring us the food. This is true communion.

- (3) Check if hunger is actually body hunger. If not, figure out what kind of hunger it is. Try to satisfy that. Try alternatives treats — drinking liquids, smelling food, eating small amounts of food with awareness, calling a friend, reading a book, going outside, a warm bath, giving love.

- (4) Eat the foods you want to eat, but eat sitting down, slowly and mindfully.

Try treating yourself as a guest, with a place mat, a folded napkin, some flowers, a candle. This nourishes heart hunger.

- (5) Be creative with how you work with Mouth Hunger.

A ‘party in the mouth’ requires attention in the mouth.

The mind has to be invited and actually be present for the mouth to have a party.

- (6) Use smaller plates, bowls, serving spoons and eating spoons.

Keep serving dishes out of sight.

It’s OK to leave food on your plate and take it home or give it back to the earth as compost.

Take 2/3 rds of what you think you want for first helpings.

Pause after eating this amount and check different kinds of hunger again before you take seconds. A very small helping and taste of seconds might be satisfying.

- (7) Be aware of the arising of “scarcity mind.” Don’t let it panic you into taking more than your body wants or need or into buying and storing large quantities of food.

(8) Eat to “satisfaction”, not to “full.”

(9) Now that you are aware that food changes mood, you can use this knowledge skillfully. For example, when you are “down” you could slowly savor eight chocolate chips or eight Frito chips, watching the changes that occur in your mood. You could nourish the heart without food.

(10) Mindfulness practice brings us freedom. This includes freedom from unnecessary suffering, freedom to make better choices, and freedom to find happiness and satisfaction in what we actually have, here and now. As we practice Mindful Eating we become free from the tyranny of the mouth and the mind, free from the trap of reacting to remembered pasta and to imagined futures.

(11) Don’t try to change everything. A small change today can result in a big change in outcome in five or ten years. You might try:

- eating one meal a day a little slower, in silence, with attention in the mouth
- eating the first three bites of any dish or meal in silence, slowly and with full attention
- putting the spoon, fork or cup down between bites or sips, even for part of a meal
- asking family / friends to support your new “Zen diet” and eat for ten minutes in silence
- separate eating from reading or TV watching. Read a page, eat mindfully, read a page.
- go on a media diet.
- honor ceremonial meals like family meals or Shabbat.
- undertake the discipline of not eating or drinking unless seated.

(12) Remember what feeds each kind of hunger and remember to provide those nutrients.

Eye hunger: color, shape, movement, the play of light and dark, beauty.

Nose hunger: fragrance

Mouth hunger: variety in sensation, intensity of flavor, different textures

Stomach hunger: something to work on, but not too full. Give me some resting time, too.

Body/cellular hunger: appropriate amounts and a healthy balance of fluids, electrolytes, vitamins, protein, carbs, and fat.

Mind hunger: new knowledge, mastering new skills, investigating through mindful eating..

Heart hunger: intimacy, connection, beauty, peacefulness, nature, children, animals, gardening, exercise, creativity, music, art, dance, silence, time for spiritual practice. Meditation!

If we do not recognize and nourish heart hunger, we will always feel hungry, no matter how much we eat.

(13) It is OK to feel empty, hungry, bored, and to eat food we don’t like.

If we are able to stay present for these experiences, we will learn much more than when we are restlessly moving about, trying to keep everything under control and trying to satisfy desire. If we are able to stay present we will lose our fear about times to come when we **will** be hungry, empty, bored, lonely, tired, and will be eating food that we don’t like.

Practices Related to Mindful Eating

- (1) Being present with the breath.
- (2) Body scan: being present with the sensations in each body part.
- (3) Body scan with loving kindness or gratitude for each body part.
- (4) Seeing deeply into food – using the inner eye to connect with the beings how brought us the food.
- (5) Checking the different kinds of hunger when hunger arises, before a meal, and before taking seconds.
- (6) Becoming aware of the feeling of satisfaction and “growing” or expanding it.

You can now also become aware of how advertising appeals to different kinds of hunger.

Additional Reading

Mindful Eating: A Guide to Rediscovering a Healthy and Joyful Relationship to Food by Jan Chozen Bays. Shambhala Publishing, 2009. Includes a CD of a dozen mindful eating exercises.

** (1) *Mindless Eating* by Brian Wansink. Many research studies showing how mindless even the experts are when it comes to eating. Informative and quite funny, too.

(2) *Art of the Inner Meal* by Donald Altman. Restoring the sacred aspect to our eating.

(3) *The Zen of Eating* by Ronna Kabatnick, PhD. The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path taught by the Buddha, as applied to eating and emotional hunger.

(4) *Harvest for Hope* by Jane Goodall. The generosity inherent in mindful eating and how it can enhance the harmony and health of beings around the world and the earth itself.

(5) *Revolution at the Table* and *The Paradox of Plenty* by Harvey Levenstein. These are fascinating and sweeping social histories of food and eating in America by a Canadian professor of history.

** (6) *Omnivore's Dilemma*, and several recent articles in the NY Times by Michael Pollan.

Pollan writes about food and eating in a most readable and insightful way. He also wrote *Botany of Desire*, about how plants and people shape each other.

(7) *Eating Mindfully* by Susan Albers. A book by a psychologist about discovering the emotional aspects and conditioned habit patterns around eating.

(8) *The Cosmos in a Carrot* by Carmen Yuen, from the Thich Nhat Han tradition.

** (9) The DVD *Supersize Me*, by Morgan Spurlock, who undertook an amazing experiment in eating McDonald's food for one month. Don't miss the “extra features.” He has also written the funny and informative *Don't Eat This Book*, also available on tape so you can listen in your car, with much more information about how we have become addicted to fast food.

(10) *Fast Food Nation* by Eric Schlosser. Also about how we have become “users” of addictive forms of food.

** (11) *Women, Food and God* by Geneen Roth – or any of her excellent books.

(12) For how to help children eat well, read anything by Ellyn Satter. See www.ellynsatter.com.

** my top three for the busy person who appreciates humor with their information.


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Ellyn Satter's Division of Responsibility in Feeding

Parents provide *structure, support* and *opportunities*. Children choose *how much* and *whether* to eat from what the parents provide.

The Division of Responsibility for Infants:

- The parent is responsible for *what*
- The child is responsible for *how much* (and everything else)

The parent helps the infant to be calm and organized and feeds smoothly, paying attention to information coming from the baby about timing, tempo, frequency and amounts

The Division of Responsibility For Toddlers through Adolescents:

- The parent is responsible for *what, when, where*
- The child is responsible for *how much* and *whether*

Parents' Feeding Jobs:

- Choose and prepare the food
- Provide regular meals and snacks
- Make eating times pleasant
- Show children what they have to learn about food and mealtime behavior
- Not let children graze for food or beverages between meal and snack times
- Let children grow up to get bodies that are right for them

Fundamental to parents' jobs is trusting children to decide *how much* and *whether* to eat. If parents do their jobs with *feeding*, children will do their jobs with *eating*:

- Children will eat
- They will eat the amount they need
- They will learn to eat the food their parents eat
- They will grow predictably
- They will learn to behave well at the table

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