



February 7, 2012

Mindful Eating as Food for Thought

By JEFF GORDINIER

TRY this: place a forkful of food in your mouth. It doesn't matter what the food is, but make it something you love — let's say it's that first nibble from three hot, fragrant, perfectly cooked ravioli.

Now comes the hard part. Put the fork down. This could be a lot more challenging than you imagine, because that first bite was very good and another immediately beckons. You're hungry.

Today's experiment in eating, however, involves becoming aware of that reflexive urge to plow through your meal like Cookie Monster on a shortbread bender. Resist it. Leave the fork on the table. Chew slowly. Stop talking. Tune in to the texture of the [pasta](#), the flavor of the cheese, the bright color of the sauce in the bowl, the aroma of the rising steam.

Continue this way throughout the course of a meal, and you'll experience the third-eye-opening pleasures and frustrations of a practice known as mindful eating.

The concept has roots in Buddhist teachings. Just as there are forms of meditation that involve sitting, breathing, standing and walking, many Buddhist teachers encourage their students to meditate with food, expanding consciousness by paying close attention to the sensation and purpose of each morsel. In one common exercise, a student is given three raisins, or a tangerine, to spend 10 or 20 minutes gazing at, musing on, holding and patiently masticating.

Lately, though, such experiments of the mouth and mind have begun to seep into a secular arena, from the Harvard School of Public Health to the California campus of Google. In the eyes of some experts, what seems like the simplest of acts — eating slowly and genuinely relishing each bite — could be the remedy for a fast-paced Paula Deen Nation in which an endless parade of new diets never seems to slow a stampede toward obesity.

Mindful eating is not a diet, or about giving up anything at all. It's about experiencing food more intensely — especially the pleasure of it. You can eat a cheeseburger mindfully, if you wish. You might enjoy it a lot more. Or you might decide, halfway through, that your body has had enough. Or that it really needs some [salad](#).

“This is anti-diet,” said Dr. [Jan Chozen Bays](#), a pediatrician and meditation teacher in Oregon and the author of “[Mindful Eating: A Guide to Rediscovering a Healthy and Joyful Relationship with Food.](#)” “I think the fundamental problem is that we go unconscious when we eat.”

The last few years have brought a spate of books, blogs and videos about hyper-conscious eating. A Harvard nutritionist, [Dr. Lilian Cheung](#), has devoted herself to studying its benefits, and is passionately encouraging corporations and health care providers to try it.

At the Food and Brand Lab at Cornell University, [Prof. Brian Wansink](#), the author of “[Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think](#),” has conducted scores of experiments on the psychological factors that lead to our bottomless bingeing. A mindful lunch hour recently became part of the schedule at Google, and self-help gurus like [Oprah Winfrey](#) and [Kathy Freston](#) have become cheerleaders for the practice.

With the annual chow-downs of Thanksgiving, Christmas and Super Bowl Sunday behind us, and Lent coming, it’s worth pondering whether mindful eating is something that the mainstream ought to be, well, more mindful of. Could a discipline pioneered by Buddhist monks and nuns help teach us how to get healthy, relieve stress and shed many of the neuroses that we’ve come to associate with food?

Dr. Cheung is convinced that it can. Last week, she met with team members at [Harvard Pilgrim Health Care](#) and asked them to spend quality time with a chocolate-covered almond.

“The rhythm of life is becoming faster and faster, so we really don’t have the same awareness and the same ability to check into ourselves,” said Dr. Cheung, who, with the Vietnamese Buddhist monk [Thich Nhat Hanh](#), co-wrote “[Savor: Mindful Eating, Mindful Life.](#)” “That’s why mindful eating is becoming more important. We need to be coming back to ourselves and saying: ‘Does my body need this? Why am I eating this? Is it just because I’m so sad and stressed out?’ ”

The topic has even found its way into culinary circles that tend to be more focused on Rabelaisian excess than monastic restraint. In January, Dr. Michael Finkelstein, a holistic physician who oversees [SunRaven](#), a holistic-living center in Bedford, N.Y., gave a talk about mindful gardening and eating at the smorgasbord-friendly headquarters of the [James Beard Foundation](#) in New York City.

“The question isn’t what are the foods to eat, in my mind,” he said in an interview. “Most people have a general sense of what the healthy foods are, but they’re not eating them. What’s on your mind when you’re eating: that’s mindful eating to me.”

A good place to try it is the [Blue Cliff Monastery](#), in Pine Bush, N.Y., a Hudson Valley hamlet. At the serene refuge about 75 miles northwest of Manhattan, curious lay people can join Buddhist

brothers and sisters for a free “day of mindfulness” twice a week.

At a gathering in January, visitors watched a videotaped lecture by Thich Nhat Hanh (pronounced tik-nyot-HAHN), who founded this and other monasteries around the world; they strolled methodically around the grounds as part of a walking meditation, then filed into a dining room for lunch.

No one spoke, in keeping with a key principle of mindful eating. The point is simply to eat, as opposed to eating and talking, eating and watching TV, or eating and watching TV and gossiping on the phone while Tweeting and updating one’s Facebook status.

A long buffet table of food awaited, all of it **vegan** and mindfully prepared by two monks in the kitchen. There was plenty of rice, herbed chickpeas, a soup made with cubes of taro, a stew of fried **tofu** in tomato sauce.

In silence, people piled their plates with food, added a squirt or two of condiments (eating mindfully doesn’t mean forsaking the hot sauce) and sat down together with eyes closed during a Buddhist prayer for gratitude and moderation.

What followed was captivating and mysterious. Surrounded by a murmur of clinking forks, spoons and chopsticks, the Blue Cliff congregation, or sangha, spent the lunch hour contemplating the enjoyment of spice, crunch, saltiness, warmth, tenderness and like-minded company.

Some were thinking, too, about the origins of the food: the thousands of farmers, truck drivers and laborers whose work had brought it here.

As their jaws moved slowly, their faces took on expressions of deep focus. Every now and then came a pause within the pause: A chime would sound, and, according to the monastery’s custom, all would stop moving and chewing in order to breathe and explore an even deeper level of sensory awareness.

It looked peaceful, but inside some of those heads, a struggle was afoot.

“It’s much more challenging than we would imagine,” said Carolyn Cronin, 64, who lives near the monastery and regularly attends the mindfulness days. “People are used to eating so fast. This is a practice of stopping, and we don’t realize how much we’re not stopping.”

For many people, eating fast means eating more. Mindful eating is meant to nudge us beyond what we’re craving so that we wake up to why we’re craving it and what factors might be stoking the habit of belly-stuffing.

“As we practice this regularly, we become aware that we don’t need to eat as much,” said Phap Khoi, 43, a robed monk who has been stationed at Blue Cliff since it opened in 2007. “Whereas when people just gulp down food, they can eat a lot and not feel full.”

It’s this byproduct of mindful eating — its potential as a psychological barrier to overeating — that has generated excitement among nutritionists like Dr. Cheung.

“Thich Nhat Hanh often talks about our craving being like a crying baby who is trying to draw our attention,” she said. “When the baby cries, the mother cradles the baby to try to calm the baby right away. By acknowledging and embracing our cravings through a few breaths, we can stop our autopilot of reaching out to the pint of [ice cream](#) or the bag of chips.”

The average American doesn’t have the luxury of ruminating on the intense tang of sriracha sauce at a monastery. “Most of us are not going to be Buddhist monks,” said Dr. Finkelstein, the holistic physician. “What I’ve learned is that it has to work at home.”

To that end, he and others suggest that people start with a few baby steps. “Don’t be too hard on yourself,” Dr. Cheung said. “You’re not supposed to be able to switch on your mindfulness button and be able to do it 100 percent. It’s a practice you keep working toward.”

Dr. Bays, the pediatrician, has recommendations that can sound like a return to the simple rhythms of Mayberry, if not “Little House on the Prairie.” If it’s impossible to eat mindfully every day, consider planning one special repast a week. Click off the TV. Sit at the table with loved ones.

“How about the first five minutes we eat, we just eat in silence and really enjoy our food?” she said. “It happens step by step.”

Sometimes, even she is too busy to contemplate a chickpea. So there are days when Dr. Bays will take three mindful sips of tea, “and then, O.K., I’ve got to go do my work,” she said. “Anybody can do that. Anywhere.”

Even scarfing down a burrito in the car offers an opportunity for insight. “Mindful eating includes mindless eating,” she said. “‘I am aware that I am eating and driving.’”

Few places in America are as frantically abuzz with activity as the [Google headquarters](#) in Mountain View, Calif., but when Thich Nhat Hanh dropped by for a [day of mindfulness](#) in September, hundreds of employees showed up.

Part of the event was devoted to eating thoughtfully in silence, and the practice was so well received that an hourlong wordless vegan lunch is now a monthly observance on the Google campus.

“Interestingly enough, a lot of the participants are the engineers, which pleases us very much,” said Olivia Wu, an executive chef at the company. “I think it quiets the mind. I think there is a real sense of feeling restored so that they can go back to the crazy pace that they came from.”

It’s not often, after all, that those workhorse technicians get to stop and smell the pesto.

“Somebody will say, ‘I ate so much less,’ ” Ms. Wu said. “And someone else will say, ‘You know, I never noticed how spicy arugula tastes.’ ”

And that could be the ingredient that helps mindful eating gain traction in mainstream American culture: flavor.

“So many people now have found themselves in an adversarial relationship with food, which is very tragic,” Dr. Bays said. “Eating should be a pleasurable activity.”

Consider These

O.K., so you don’t happen to live in a Buddhist monastery. You can still give mindful eating a spin by incorporating a few chilled-out gestures and rituals into your regular calorie intake.

WHEN YOU EAT, JUST EAT. Unplug the electronica. For now, at least, focus on the food.

CONSIDER SILENCE. Avoiding chatter for 30 minutes might be impossible in some families, especially with young children, but specialists suggest that greenhorns start with short periods of quiet.

TRY IT WEEKLY. Sometimes there’s no way to avoid wolfing down onion rings in your cubicle. But if you set aside one sit-down meal a week as an experiment in mindfulness, the insights may influence everything else you do.

PLANT A GARDEN, AND COOK. Anything that reconnects you with the process of creating food will magnify your mindfulness.

CHEW PATIENTLY. It’s not easy, but try to slow down, aiming for 25 to 30 chews for each mouthful.

USE FLOWERS AND CANDLES. Put them on the table before dinner. Rituals that create a serene environment help foster what one advocate calls “that moment of gratitude.”

FIND A BUDDHIST CONGREGATION where the members invite people in for a day of mindfulness. For New Yorkers, it’s an easy drive to the Blue Cliff Monastery, about 90 minutes

north of the city: bluecliffmonastery.org/ on the Web.



MORE IN DINING & WINE (1 OF 44 ARTICLES)

OPEN

Wines of The Times: Sicilian Reds Harness a Volcano's Energy

[Read More »](#)