

Eating Meditation by Richard Brady

Mindfulness practices aid us in stopping and focusing our minds. Developing our ability to stop helps us reduce the amount of stress in our lives and be more available to the present moment. Developing our ability to focus helps us learn more effectively. The practice of eating meditation helps us develop both of these abilities.

In offering meditation to young people and to the adults who teach them, sharing the practice of mindful eating has invariably produced positive and at times dramatic learning experiences. Eating is something we've done all our lives, but seldom do we pay more than passing attention to the tastes, smells and activity of eating. Even while eating especially good meals, we spend most of the time talking with others or thinking about other things. Most young people and adults eat in order to satisfy their hunger and, in some cases, to nourish their bodies. They are often in a hurry to finish their meal and go on to other, more important things.

The practice of mindful eating is not about eating to finish a meal, satisfy hunger, or receive nourishment. It is simply eating to be aware of and appreciate eating. When I teach eating meditation, this is the most important point I make. Everything else follows from it. In order to bring our full awareness to our eating, we cannot be engaged in conversation. Thus we eat in silence. In order to focus our full attention on the bite we are chewing, we shouldn't be thinking about the next bite. So we put our utensils down after each bite and completely chew the bite that is in our mouth before picking them up again and taking another bite. Similarly, we put our glass down between sips and put our cookie down until the last bit of the bite we've taken has melted away. And, if we're truly enjoying the taste of the food in our mouth, shouldn't make contact with our smiles as we eat?

I have taught eating meditation to students from third grade through upper school. In my upper school math classes, it's common for the students to ask to have a party during class on the last day before a vacation. In this context, "have a party" means "have food." Some years ago I realized that this would be a great opportunity to introduce eating meditation. I told my 10th graders that we could have a party, and that it would be a special one. One student volunteered to bake chocolate chip cookies, another to bring apple cider. When the time arrived for the party, each student received two cookies and a cup of cider. I explained the practice of mindful eating and told the students that I would help them focus on their eating by sounding a bell several times during the meditation. The bell would be a signal to stop their chewing or drinking, breathe in and out three times, bringing their awareness to tastes and smells and to the presence of others also enjoying their snack. One of these "parties" stands out in my mind. After all the other students had left the last student came up to me and told me that she had been having difficulties with food and that this experience had given her a new way to relate to what she was eating.

Most of us have difficulty remaining mindful for any length of time. For this reason, it's helpful for us to focus our minds on something interesting or enjoyable, perhaps even compelling. Older students and adults may be able to stay focused on their breath or use their breath as an aid to focus on a mindfulness verse or mantra. However, younger students are much more likely to respond positively to active forms of meditation such as walking and eating meditation. Offering eating meditation to my daughter's fourth grade class, I had to reassure the teacher that she didn't need to keep an eye on the students and could participate along with them. Her particular concern, a hyperactive boy, ate so slowly and mindfully, that his first cookie was only half finished at the end of the meditation.

Eating meditation is a regular part of my presentations to teachers. In 1-hour workshops I often include a 5-minute raisin meditation. The introduction I give for the meditation includes sharing the reading "Eating a Tangerine" from Thich Nhat Hanh's book, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, the passage that introduced mindfulness to me 21 years ago. Then I give each participant 3 organic (this is important in terms of pesticide residue) raisins, an idea from Jon Kabat-Zinn. At the end of the meditation it's common for most participants not to have eaten their third raisin.

When I conduct 3-day, residential workshops for teachers, we have a mindful lunch on the second day. With some assurance I tell the participants that they are about to eat the tastiest soup and salad of their lives. When they eat their food slowly, they will not only taste it more, they'll digest it better and will need less food to feel satisfied. The contrast between this experience and the usual teacher lunch does not need to be belabored. However, this is not an easy practice to do in the middle of a noisy cafeteria. It helps to do it with others, to support each other in this practice, being aware of the pleasure all have eating in mindfulness. If it's a nice day, going outside with a few friends to share a silent meal or eat alone in the midst of a busy day is such a gift.

There are many possible benefits of mindful eating including slowing down, tasting and enjoying food more, and developing more focused attention. This is a wonderful practice to do oneself and share with others.