

Mindful Cooking and Eating

*Learning to eat and live mindfully
is the key to experiencing
health and peace.*

Thich Nhat Hanh / Lilian Cheung

As a practice of mindfulness, mindful cooking and eating is primarily about creating a space to pause and be aware of the present moment. It means concentrating fully on the preparation of the meal and then also as you eat the food. This also entails taking an interest in these processes, devoting our full attention to them.

For example, when cutting the vegetables, we can pay attention to the slices that we cut piece by piece, to their shape and texture, as well as the respective colors that become visible. We can also perceive the sound as we cut them, or their smell, which may develop in intensity as we pay attention. When we cook rice, we can observe the steam in the pot and hear the water boiling. As we consciously eat, we likewise engage all our senses.

Before we begin to actually eat, we can be attentive and mindful while setting the table and serving the meal. As mindfulness also includes taking a mindful approach to ourselves in general, the question of what we eat is also important. Does it nourish us sufficiently? Do we feel vital and healthy after eating this food?

Mindful cooking and eating also involved thinking more consciously about the production, transport and sale of food. What paths does the food take until it finally ends up on our plate? Under what conditions do those who produce our food work? Is the production of the food environmentally friendly and fair?

In order to make the idea of mindful eating more tangible, I often use an exercise called “The Sound of a Raisin” from the book *Achtsam mit Kindern leben [Living Mindfully with Children]* by Nils Altner, Ph.D. – a mindfulness researcher at the University of Duisburg / Essen.

The Sound of a Raisin¹

(Original text by Nils Altner, Ph.D.)

Invite yourself to an experiment in sensual perception:

Take a raisin, without eating it right away, and hold it between your fingers.

I have one here too. Look at this little something and pretend you are examining such a thing for the first time.

What do you see?

If you'd like, describe aloud what you see.

I see something wrinkled and brown with grooves. It's partly transparent. It looks like a piece of amber. Here you can see the base of the stem.

Do you see anything else?

How does this thing feel?

Mine is soft and malleable. It feels rough and gets softer and stickier between my fingers.

What do you notice?

Do you think if we hold the fruit to our ear and press lightly, it makes a sound? Try it.

Yes, mine crackles! And yours?

Did you expect that?

Let's smell it. What does it smell like? I smell something fruity, sweet.

Something leathery and tart, not just sweet. What does your raisin smell like?

Do you notice something happening in your mouth? My saliva's starting to flow.

My mouth is ready to chew and eat. But we're not there yet.

Let's first hold the fruit to our lips. How does it feel?

It tickles mine. And my lips feel the rough ridges of the dried fruit.

Do your lips feel these ridges more clearly than your fingers?

Now, let's put the raisin between our lips and nudge it with our tongue.

What happens? Can you taste anything? My tongue is already noting the sweetness.

Do you notice that also? Where does your tongue taste the sweetness – at the tip, more at the back or on the sides of the tongue?

Now we put the raisin in our mouth and move it back and forth. What do you feel now? It seems to me the grooves are getting bigger and bigger. Also in my mouth, the whole raisin appears to get bigger and bigger. Do you notice that too?

I notice I'm salivating more. I think it's now time.

Let's put the fruit between two teeth and close our eyes.

My jaw muscles are tightening. What about yours? My mouth is filled with sweetness.

This one little raisin tastes so sweet!

After the exercise a conversation follows:

Moderator: "What did we just do?"

Response 1: "Eat mindfully."

Response 2: "Eat with all the senses."

Moderator: "Do you normally eat a raisin like this? If not, then how?"

Did you think of anything else while you were eating? Did you discover anything new while eating?"

The course participants are given the task to try eating mindfully a few times in their everyday life – regardless of what is eaten or how much, or how much time they want to spend on this exercise.

The food can also be prepared in a mindful way. With salads, for example: notice the juice that the cucumber produces as it is sliced, the different shades of green ...

As the Social Work degree program has more semester hours per week than the other programs, we combine these course hours into a “mindfulness day”. On this day, the focus is on mindful cooking and eating together. In a relatively small space with a kitchen, around 20 people move around together, trying to cook a meal without speaking to each other. It’s always remarkable how well this works, and the food tastes (for the most part) excellent ;-). The setting of the tables is done just as silently, and during the first 10 minutes of the meal no one speaks while they eat. For many, remaining silent over such a long period – approximately 90 minutes from cooking to the first bite – is a completely new experience. After the first 10 minutes of silence at the table, some immediately return to speaking, while others have taken so much pleasure in the silence that they prefer to go on eating without speaking.

Moderator: “What was your experience?”

Response 1: “Super! I’ll try it at home too.”

Response 2: “I never thought it possible to cook like this.”

Response 3: “I found it embarrassing to just look at others, not saying anything.”

Response 4: “I paid much more attention to my food.”

The topic of mindful cooking and eating can also be expanded further: including, for example, healthy and sustainable eating.²

Since so many students said they found eating in silence a positive experience, it might be interesting to set up an area in the university cafeteria where this could be a regular possibility.

Primary literature used for the lessons

Thich Nhat Hanh / Cheung, Lilian (2010). *Savor. Mindful Eating, Mindful Life*.
New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

¹ Altner 2009, p. 60 f. [Author’s translation]. This exercise is reprinted with the kind permission of the author.

² At the University of Applied Sciences in Amsterdam, one of the Munich Model’s collaboration partners, there has been a joint project between the Positive Psychology program and the European Institute for Macrobiotics (Kushi) for several years now.

Auch habe ich die Konsistenz des Gerichts (Semmelknödel mit Pilsener) noch wie so bewusst wahrgenommen. Eine Freundin von mir meinte allerdings, ihr sei das Essen zu schleimig, wenn sie sich so darauf konzentriert.

Auch wenn es spannend war, sich über die Erfahrung auszutauschen, werde ich es das nächste Mal alleine ausprobieren. Wir sind dann doch recht schnell abgeschweift und haben uns unterhalten.

30. 10.

Achtsam essen: alleine

Was ich sehr angenehm fand:
Ich hatte den Eindruck, dass ich wirklich aufgehört habe, zu essen, als ich satt war. Anders als sonst habe ich nicht mehr nachgefast, weil es mir so geschmeckt hat. Dadurch, dass ich eh total bei der Sache war und den Geschmack "ausgekostet" habe, hat mir eine Portion völlig gereicht.

1. 11.

20 Minuten Meditation am Morgen.

→ Hat gut getan. Konnte mich gut fokussieren... wahrscheinlich auch, weil ich heute frei habe.

Abends: Bodyscan zum Einschlafen (weiter als bis zu den Knien bin ich nicht gekommen)

8. 11.

"Liebende Güte" finde ich ziemlich cool. Ich glaube, dass das eine Übung ist, auf die man super zurückgreifen kann, wenn mal nicht so läuft.

Heute war ein blöder Trödel-Tag, an dem ich nicht ansatzweise das geschafft habe, was ich mir vorgenommen hatte. Deswegen war ich abends ziemlich geknickt und ein bisschen sauer auf mich selbst.

Körperscan im Sitzen auf dem Sofa.

20 min, war ein bisschen komisch weil ich mich immer wieder ein umsehen musste und so war meine Konzentration nicht so gut

14.05.19

Ich habe gerade auf Grund meiner Schwangerschaft extrem Gelüster auf Schokolade. Also habe ich ein Schokoladestückchen aufmerksam gegessen. Und

damit habe ich es geschafft bei einem zu bleiben.

17.05.19

Gehmeditation, 20 min

Dabei kann man super abschalten, da man so sehr damit beschäftigt ist auf seine Schritte zu achten.

20.05.19

Meditation mit einem Stein.

Ich habe mir einen Stein genommen und in ganz genau befühlt. Ich habe probiert alle Konkrete nachzufahren und in mir

Journal Notes

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F. S.

5/25/19, breathing meditation + MA-RA-NA-THA

Duration: 15 min

Today was a hot day and I was just with a client that I look after for 24 hours. We went shopping and then I started cooking. Unexpectedly, my circulation went on a strike – I think it was due to the strain of carrying shopping bags in the heat and the fumes while cooking. I was sweating, I felt nauseous and I could hardly stand on my feet. I sat down, but a slight panic spread over me. It didn't get better. So I tried to breathe evenly and concentrate on my breathing. My thoughts were confused and I felt very uncomfortable. So in addition, I tried the Maranatha method to try and relieve the panic. I did this for a few minutes until I was able to get up and get some water. I sat down again and continued the meditation. The Maranatha helped me a lot to keep calm and to overcome this state. After 15 minutes I felt better and I was able to continue cooking.

M. M.

Mindful eating a kiwi

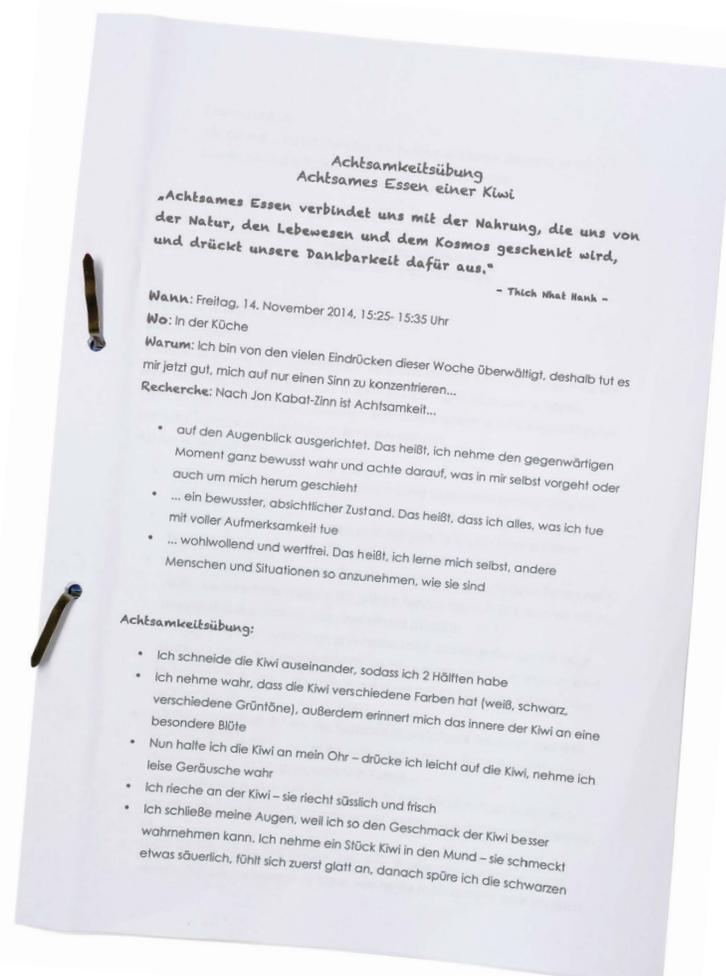
When: Friday, 11/14/14, 3:25–3:35 p.m.

Where: in the kitchen

Why: I am overwhelmed by the many impressions of this week, so it does me good now to concentrate only on one sense at a time.

Research: mindfulness according to Jon Kabat-Zinn

- focused on the moment. This means that I perceive the present moment very consciously and pay attention to what is going on within myself or what is happening around me
- a conscious, intentional state. This means that everything I do, I do with full attention
- benevolent and value-free. This means that I learn to accept myself, other people and situations as they are.



Mindfulness exercise:

- I cut the kiwi apart so that I have 2 halves.
- I notice that the kiwi has different colors (white, black, different shades of green), and the inside of the kiwi reminds me of an exotic blossom.
- Now I hold the kiwi against my ear – if I press lightly on the kiwi, I perceive soft sounds.
- I smell the kiwi – it smells sweet and fresh.
- I close my eyes because it enables me to better perceive the taste of the kiwi. I put a piece of kiwi in my mouth – it tastes a bit sour, feels smooth at first, and then I feel the black seeds and grooves.
- I notice that the last few minutes I was more in the present; I was able to eat the kiwi in peace and without rushing.

Mindful tea drinking

When: Sunday, 11/16/14, 2:20 p.m.

Where: at the dining table

Why: It's noon on Sunday and I know that I have to leave my familiar surroundings again this evening to go to Munich to study. That's why, rather than focus my thoughts on what will happen a few hours from now, I'm making an effort to focus on the "now".

Mindfulness exercise:

- First I turn on the kettle and get my favorite cup with many colorful flowers and dots out of the kitchen cupboard.
- While the water begins to boil, I put a tea bag of a delicious Ayurvedic spiced tea into the cup.
- I smell the tea bag. The scent reminds me of various trips to Asia; I see, for example, the green tea plantations in Sri Lanka before me. In this moment I feel liberated and happy.
- I pour the boiling water into my cup and let the tea steep for a few minutes. Meanwhile I smell how the tea's aroma unfurls.
- Now I sit down at the dining table on a comfortable chair in front of the stove and take a sip of tea.
- It's still very hot; I take a sip anyway. I taste the cinnamon and vanilla in the tea, but also other oriental spices. I think of bright colors, markets in India ...
- I close my eyes and imagine the green tea plantations in Sri Lanka, how the tea was harvested and transported before it reached us.
- After about 10 minutes, I realize that while I was drinking tea, I didn't even think about what's still to come, that I have to say goodbye and go to Munich ...

N. S.

5/14/19

I have extreme cravings for chocolate as a result of my pregnancy. So I ate a chocolate piece attentively. And with that I managed to anchor my awareness in myself.

P. A.

For some time now I have been trying to eat with more awareness. Not speaking during cooking and eating is very pleasant. One perceives the food and the environment better, more intensely.

During the meal you can focus on the taste and consistency in your mouth. One tastes the individual flavors much more intensely, and the individual "components" of the food are only gradually integrated.

I like very much to take a longer period of time to eat and to do so slowly and thoughtfully, taking a break now and then. This is not always possible in everyday life, especially if you often eat together with others (which is also nice).

Unfortunately, you can't always encourage everyone to eat mindfully and so the other person has to wait. But maybe that is just as well.

S. L.

Eating mindfully: alone

Which I found very pleasant – I had the impression that I actually stopped eating when I was full. While it tasted so good, I didn't take a second helping like usual. One portion was enough for me because I was totally focused and was able to truly "taste" the flavors.

