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WINTER 2008

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find your center

# the yoga of eating

Let go of the struggle and find peace and nourishment with every bite.

BY PEGGY HALL

**T**he yoga of eating requires no special pose, no attendance in class and no flexibility other than that of the mind. The yoga of eating isn't about following a specific diet, becoming a vegetarian or denying yourself your favorite foods. In fact, it's quite the opposite: Yoga is about fully embracing the experience at hand, about being completely aware of and actively participating in whatever is happening at the present moment. Yoga is much more than simply mastering a series of poses; it's about integrating the various aspects of your being – the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual – into a state of wholeness and oneness. And from that balanced state, you can quiet your mental chatter and listen to the voice of your soul.

## How Are They Related

First, yoga teaches us that everything in life – including food – is infused with prana, or life force energy. When you eat a certain food, you absorb its prana and it becomes a part of your very being. (That precept alone may be enough to make you pause before taking a bite of processed, chemical-laden food.) Science teaches us that the nutrients (or lack thereof) in food build and nourish (or deplete and impair) everything in our body – from our cells, blood, muscles and bones to our thoughts, moods and emotions. “Eating well regulates the production of important brain chemicals known as neurotrans-





## Yoga & Weight Loss

While the yoga of eating is not about calorie-counting or deprivation, many people find that they naturally - even effortlessly - achieve their preferred weight when they focus on what and how they are eating. Selecting foods that are full of life-giving prana, taking time to enjoy those foods, eating with a sense of gratitude and pleasure and acknowledging the nourishment that food provides helps people let go of their struggles with food and replace them with a sense of peace and serenity. Registered dietitian and nutritionist Beverly Price finds yoga to be an important adjunct to her eating-disorder and weight-management support groups. "Conventional weight-loss plans tend to superimpose a structure or regimen rather than teach individuals to make choices based on their highest good," she says. "Yoga teaches individuals to trust their intuition when it comes to making healthy food choices."

mitters, like serotonin and melatonin [the feel-good hormones that produce a sense of pleasure, contentment and peaceful well-being]," explains Dharma Singh Khalsa, MD, a longevity specialist and author of the book *Food as Medicine* (Atria Books, 2003).

Second, yoga teaches awareness through breathing. When you learn to breathe consciously, you learn to live consciously. That is the essence of mindfulness. Conscious breathing infuses your being with life-giving prana and brings you back to the present moment so that you are more fully aware

wonderful and not-so-wonderful sensations of eating. Accept and trust your natural self and your highest desires will manifest." (Hopefully, those highest desires won't include doughnuts!)

So just how exactly does one become more mindful and self-trusting when it comes to food? The following eating exercise, or bhoj kriya, is based on the teachings of Kundalini Master Yogi Bhajan and offers step-by-step instructions on how to focus your mind on your meals and bring the sacred back to the table.

**"Stop seeing your body and food as the enemy and instead listen to the messages encoded in cravings, appetites and tastes."**

and alert. When you learn to breathe consciously, there is no more sleepwalking (or mindless eating) through life. Registered dietitian Beverly Price explains how this applies to eating. "To truly enjoy a food, one must eat mindfully, paying attention to its taste, texture and other qualities," says Price, a yoga teacher for Reconnect with Food in Royal Oak, Michigan. "Eating a small amount of food mindfully can be more satisfying than eating a lot of food without paying attention."

Third, yoga teaches self-acceptance, self-trust and self-compassion. You learn to experience the situation at hand with an open mind, without opinion or judgment and with awareness and understanding. "Be kind and loving to yourself," says Charles Eisenstein, a yogi and author of *The Yoga of Eating* (New Trends Publishing, 2003). "Stop seeing your body and food as the enemy and instead listen to the messages encoded in cravings, appetites and tastes. As we develop trust in these messages, we discover subtler levels of sensitivity and greater unity of mind and body."

But what if those messages are telling you to eat the chocolate doughnut instead of the egg-white omelette? Well, embrace that, too! "I invite people to love food more, not less," says Eisenstein. "This means giving full attention to all of the





## Bhoj Kriya

To begin, first wash your hands as you take three conscious breaths, mentally letting go of any previous activity and turning your mind toward the sacred act of eating.

Next, set out a selection of several different types of foods that can be eaten with your fingers, such as strawberries, nuts, dried fruit, slices of apple or cheese, a piece of carrot or a piece of pie. You decide. Don't worry about putting out what you consider to be "healthy" foods – in fact, include some of your favorite treats so that this exercise will be even more rewarding.

Sit calmly in front of the food and close your eyes. Take three conscious breaths. Think about what you want to eat and why you want to eat it. Are you seeking nourishment? Relaxation? Comfort? Energy? Indulgence? Notice these feelings without opinion or judgment. Allow and accept.

Open your eyes and gaze at your food. Consider how it was grown or produced

## On a Personal Note

While watching *Ratatouille* at the movie theater last summer, I bought the obligatory bag of popcorn and a large diet soda. (I know, I know....) With my eyes riveted on the screen, my hand went from bag to mouth again and again until I snapped out of my eating trance when I heard the line uttered by the very thin food critic in the movie: "I don't eat what I don't love." Whoa! Suddenly I could taste the popcorn for what it really was: rather salty, slightly greasy and somewhat stale. I didn't have to make myself stop eating; it suddenly lost all its appeal. No will power was needed but also no reproach, no self-criticism, no judgment – just awareness, acceptance and understanding.

– Peggy Hall

and what labor (including your own) went into bringing this food to you. Offer a blessing, such as "I am grateful for this food for those who provided it. May it bring me peace and nourishment."

Select what you would like to eat first. Pick up the morsel of food with all five fingers, symbolizing the connection between yourself and the life-giving energy of the food. Gaze at your chosen food and notice its color, texture, appearance and shape. Consider what nourishment this food will bring you – not just the nutrients (though consider those as well) but the emotional component. Ask yourself why you have chosen this food at this moment. What is it you need from this food? Invite it into your immediate experience. If this contemplation has prompted you to make a different food selection, please follow your inclination.

Smell the food and notice the aroma. This signals your salivary enzymes to get ready for digestion.

Now take a bite and, before chewing, notice the sensation in your mouth. Is it heavy or light? Smooth or rough? Warm or cold? Begin to chew at least 30 times, concentrating on the texture, temperature, flavor and prana of the food. Continue to chew until the food becomes liquid. All the while, continue to focus on the food and what you are receiving from it. ("This orange is so refreshing! It's providing vitamin C to nourish my skin.") Be as specific and descriptive as possible. And if the chosen food is a cookie and it makes your mouth sing, enjoy it! Embrace it and experience it without judgment or opinion – just pure awareness. This is the yoga of eating.

Before taking the next bite, sweep your tongue across your teeth, removing every last trace of the food. Only then, select another morsel and repeat the exercise until you're

satisfied. When you're finished, place the fingers of the hand you used for eating in the center of your other palm, symbolizing the union of yoga. Offer another blessing as you take three conscious breaths and notice how the different foods make you feel.

Finally, still breathing consciously, wash your hands again and visualize your body digesting and absorbing what it needs from the food.

Yes, this takes a lot of time and concentration. No, it's not something you will probably do every time you eat. But with practice, you'll find that your experience with food will begin to change. Your taste buds will come alive, your digestion will improve and your energy will increase. You'll find yourself naturally seeking out what it is you really need at any given moment to nourish your body, mind and soul. ☺



## More Tips for Mindful Eating

**Eat sitting down** (that doesn't include in your car or in front of the television!).

**Enjoy your meals in a pleasant setting** (outdoors is ideal) and avoid doing other activities while eating.

**Engage all five senses while eating.** Notice the appearance, aroma, taste and texture of the food. Listen to uplifting music or to the sounds of nature.

**Allow yourself time** – at least 20 minutes to finish your meal.

**Avoid eating or preparing food when you're stressed, rushed, upset or worried.** Instead, take a walk or practice conscious breathing to help calm down and prepare your mind and body for the sacred act of eating.