

# Satipaṭṭhāna (24) Mindful Eating

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

awareness, body, hostage, thoughts, relax thinking, daily life, automatic pilot, float, satiation, desire, mouth, tongue, hungry, chewing, mirror, taste, food, meal, choice, impulse, attitudes

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The direction of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice is toward having loose, open, clear awareness that wisely floats around and includes all aspects of our human experience. Awareness can encompass the body, feelings, mind states, mental processes, experiences of the world, and thoughts. Ultimately, it is not a matter of limiting awareness to one particular domain of our life, but of allowing awareness to take everything in, as it becomes free, loose, relaxed, open, and receptive. Depending on the circumstances, the mind might be aware of thinking, the body, feeling, emotion, sounds – whatever is around us.

To some degree, awareness goes along with the call of whatever is happening; and to some degree, we have a choice about where it is important to bring our attention. We might choose an orientation or aspiration based on compassion, healing, what is beneficial, or fun. We become wise with the play in awareness between choice and non-choice – and begin enjoying this.

*Satipaṭṭhāna* practice begins with a strong emphasis on the body – breathing in the body – and limits the orientation of awareness to the body. If we go too quickly to the full range of all the different things we can pay attention to, floating through them, then the mind most likely will get hijacked and held hostage by thoughts.

We are cultivating the mind's ability to relax its thinking – to relax the grip of thoughts and preoccupations – by coming back to the breathing. It is very important to realize that this is what we are doing. It is not so much that we are developing the muscle of concentration, which to some degree we are. But when concentration is overemphasized, people can get tense and tight.

A big part of what we are doing is decreasing the impulse, the attachment, sometimes the addiction, strong orientation, or fixation on certain limited parts of our human experience. This attachment can often be to thoughts, ideas, memories, and planning. It can be to our emotions and feelings. Sometimes we can become stuck on the body. But we are learning to relax all this. As we relax the body more and more, we become able to settle in and be with the breathing and the body.

This loosening of attachment is part of the field in which we are practicing *satipaṭṭhāna*. I bring it up today because I want to talk about a particular activity mentioned in the text to which we can bring full awareness. This is mindful eating, where mealtime is meditation time. Mealtime is mindfulness time. Mindful eating is one of the wonderful places to cultivate mindfulness. We will use it as a kind of case study for bringing mindfulness into daily life.

Many people eat on automatic pilot. They eat without careful attention. Maybe they are eating alone while watching something on a screen or listening to a podcast or the radio. In the old days, they might be reading the newspaper. They may be absorbed in conversation with others, hardly noticing that they are eating or even what they are eating. Sometimes people eat quickly. I am a fast eater, so I know that well. We can eat so quickly that we are not really taking in the experience of eating.

When eating is automatic in this way, it often gives free rein to the mind to do whatever it wants. The mind has a strong tendency to be fixated or preoccupied with things. If the mind is given too much freedom to travel down its highways and byways, then we actually live a truncated, limited life. Even though our options might seem unlimited – because we can think about an unlimited number of things – thinking represents only a small domain of our life potential.

When sitting down to eat, it is wonderful from time to time to eat alone or quietly without speaking – so that you can just be eating and doing nothing else. If you are just with the eating and floating your attention with the experience, this means that you are not in a hurry. You are there just to be with the experience – with all the

different parts of the experience and with full awareness of the body. You include all the physical things that come into play as you are eating.

One of the things I have found nice to do – especially when eating alone or quietly in a meditative way – is to notice the first moment when I feel that the hunger is gone and there is the simplest form of satiation. I am not full. There might be a desire for more in the mouth or the tongue. I do not know if this may be the pull of pleasure or if the mouth and tongue are the last to get the news that I'm full, but the drive to eat remains. And here, I try to pay attention to the first time I am no longer hungry and can feel the simplest satiation, I stop eating then, and notice what happens.

There might still be a desire to eat – a desire for pleasure. It is fascinating to sit and watch how that pull or impulse morphs and changes when we don't give into it and don't reinforce it – but instead make room just to feel it. This is not quite the same as denying ourselves. It is actually more like allowing an impulse or desire to be there in its pristine glory without giving into it. Practicing mindfulness with that desire, we just allow and feel it – “Oh, there it is.”

One of the things to learn from mindful eating is how often we eat mindlessly. This is fascinating to notice. Are we eating in a hurry? Are we eating too much? Are we afraid or anxious around food? Is there greed or confusion when we're eating? If so, take time to feel and be with that. Give a second, third, and fourth look at the feelings connected to eating. Some of these feelings are not present as we eat. But some do limit our natural capacity to be attuned to the body's own intuition about what to eat, how to eat, and how much to eat.

As I became more sensitive, I appreciated seeing that the body has its own intuition about how to eat, when to eat, and what to pick up at different times from the plate. The body has a deeper knowing, which we can tune into when we develop this deeper sensitivity of mindfulness.

It is also a great pleasure to eat mindfully – to eat in silence and be absorbed in the pleasure of eating, just taking it all in and enjoying it. Being fully mindful of eating allows the thinking mind to get quieter because thinking is not such a big part of the experience. It is possible to eat a meal – especially if you eat in silence – and feel more clear, relaxed, and open by the time you finish.

I have known some people who enjoy eating mindfully. They will spend quite a long time just eating. Generally, mindful eating is best done alone rather than socially because other people will finish long before you. But take your time to eat.

I have eaten mindfully in different ways, such as taking my time to eat, and the sense of pleasure and meditative absorption has sometimes been quite strong. Because I have been a fast eater ever since I was a child, one way I devised to cultivate this greater mindfulness was to eat with my non-dominant hand. Doing so brought more attention to what I was doing. When I have really gotten into it – really enjoying eating slowly – I would actually put my utensil down between bites. I would put a forkful of food in my mouth, put the fork down, and then just be with the process of chewing. Only after I had swallowed, would I then pick up the fork. For me, this would be a little antidote to habitually putting food in my mouth and then, while chewing, already digging in for the next bite. That habit seems innocent enough. But instead, I put the fork down and am really present for the experience of eating.

The activity of eating is a mirror for our attitudes and approaches toward what is going on for us. This is part of mindfulness practice – to really see that. If some of these attitudes are not so helpful for you, an important part of mindfulness practice is the ability to shift and let go of such attitudes in a relaxed way. The degree to which you begin to have some choice about the attitudes of your mind, you want to exercise that choice. But don't be worried if you can't. Do not force it.

You are also becoming aware of how you are aware. Is there a fixation in the mind and awareness? Or can the awareness be soft and loose? If this metaphor works for you, can you allow awareness to float around the whole experience of eating food: the arm lifting to put a bite in your mouth, the food going into the mouth, the movements of the tongue, the taste, the chewing? Just really be there for it.

Then, as mindfulness gets stronger over time, our attention can float between all these different areas. Awareness is not necessarily centered on only the physical experience of eating but on the wholeness of who we are as we eat, which includes eating.

This will be the last talk on mindfulness of activities. I offer it to you as a case study to explore over this weekend. Maybe you can eat a couple of meals quietly by yourself. If you are with someone who is a meditator, you could ask to eat together in silence and explore the benefits, the richness, and the challenges of eating mindfully without hurrying. Just eating.

I hope you enjoy your mindfulness and mindful eating. Thank you.