

# Visit Yourself<sup>®</sup> LLC

## *Mindfulness Meditation for Stress Reduction*

### **Mindful Eating: A Journey to Wholeness**

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Bread pudding--that's what brought me to meditation practice. I remember walking past Marvelous Market in Washington D.C.'s Dupont Circle late in the year of 2000. I'd recently decided to give up processed flour and sugar in an effort to curb my nightly cravings and overeating. A friend in recovery from food-related addictions had suggested letting go of these foods--a practice I would later hear called "renunciation" in the Buddhist tradition. Renunciation might appear to be a form of deprivation, but a deeper look shows that, if practiced with the intention of self-care, renunciation can be a skillful means toward personal freedom. It can be the start of a process that frees the renunciate from unskillful attachment to behaviors and material items that have caused harm.

I didn't know anything about Buddhism that day in Dupont Circle and, as I looked longingly through the store window at the bread pudding in the display case, I was certainly feeling more deprivation than personal freedom. The dessert was about the size of three of my fists, and therefore was supposedly about three times as large as my stomach. Yet, I'd eaten these delicacies whole and straight out of the white cardboard box in one sitting. The first time I did this was in high school. After coming home from a night out with friends--another evening of feeling like the odd one out who couldn't say the right things--I saw the bread pudding in my parents' refrigerator and took it to the sunroom in the back of the house. The sunroom was where my mother put the outdoor plants in the winter and it was also where we kept the TV--the only witness to that night's and many future nights' binges.

I was only planning on having a few slivers of the bread pudding. But as the butter knife sank in again and again, that plan evaporated as did my self-esteem. I sank into a trance of oblivion...watching TV...eating one more sliver after another...what did one more sliver matter?

Many more late night one-more-slivers followed during high school. Then the leftover pasta eaten furtively from the vegetarian co-op to which I belonged in college. Followed by sneaking a Mount Pleasant group house roommate's Girl Scout cookies--surely he wouldn't notice if just one more was gone. The morning after these out-of-control food forays found me wallowing in self-loathing. Self-loathing can be the most painful split from the wholeness to which we ultimately belong. We may forget our belonging to the universe, to the family of all beings, to our human communities...we may forget all of these, but the pain of forgetting our inherent belonging to ourselves trumps all.

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In an effort to get back into my own good graces, I would desperately counter-balance the binges by starving myself for a day or by giving myself stomach cramps from laxative "diet teas." Finally, the friend in recovery from food addiction suggested abstaining from processed flour and sugar. Thus I found myself in Dupont Circle walking past Marvelous Market that day in late 2000. Tears came to my eyes as I realized that I could no longer eat my childhood favorite food. The tears shocked me. I was not a person who cried easily—I'd thought crying too "girly." I realized with those tears that this was not about the pudding.

In the Spring of 2001 I was on a week-long silent meditation retreat. Another friend had suggested meditation classes as a step toward recovery from compulsive food behavior. Despite my fears that those weird new-agey meditators would try to brainwash me and make me give them all my money, I was desperate enough to try it. In the very first class I attended, as my mind and body came into the same time zone, I discovered a sense of wholeness and peace that I'd never known possible, but had sought my entire life. I signed up for a retreat with both fear and hope.

One morning before lunch during that meditation retreat, the regular meditation ended early. One of the teachers, Pat, invited us to do an eating meditation with raisins. I started sweating. Not knowing how common this exercise was in meditation communities, my mind wildly tried to convince me that this was some exercise specifically created to shame me. We were each handed three raisins and invited to contemplate the cultivation and logistics required to bring the raisin to us in that moment. We were invited to sniff, feel, and even listen to the raisin. During this time, I was so hungry I could hardly stand it. I began to hate Pat. Were we going to eat the raisin or what? We were then invited to feel the craving directly and I realized with a start that the craving was coming not from my belly, but rather from a tightness in my chest and throat. As soon as I located the physical origins of the craving, it decreased. I still wanted the raisin, but I no longer felt possessed by the desire for it. This was amazing to me. Did other people know that a craving can be explored as mere physical sensations? And that, as soon as the cravings are located physically, their intensity decreases?

I came home from that retreat assuming that I'd found the answer and would never again eat compulsively. I felt like a convert and couldn't wait to preach to the masses. Unfortunately, I found that I would still eat compulsively, just less often. Just as we can't control whether the mind thinks—all we can do is create the conditions for it to settle—I couldn't control how I ate. All I could do was set the conditions to support my pausing and breathing so that I might remember to find how cravings felt in my body and be with them with as much kindness as I could muster. This journey engendered a sense of humility in myself and a compassion for others who also want to change their own harmful behaviors, but feel unable to stop. I ultimately found forgiveness for my own inability to eat "perfectly" and even, over time, lost the desire to do so. In the place of this desire for perfection there grew a new desire: to never again shut myself out of my own heart.

***Visit Yourself<sup>®</sup> provides Mindful Eating seminars as well as Mindfulness Meditation classes and seminars***

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