

Nourishing Body and Soul

Healing our Hunger

By Sonia Osorio



My family's history is one of lack — not of money or food or possessions — but of self-love. This history has manifested in heart disease and related conditions, as this lack of self-love was compensated for by food, taken in abundance or denied in extreme. Our hearts ached as our bodies became ill; yet we barely recognized this, so disconnected were we from the very thing that was meant to nourish us. This legacy is one shared by many today: A malnourishment in both body and heart, which is, in effect, a starvation of the soul and an act of great harm against ourselves and others. Our soul hungers for a deeper relationship — to our world, to our bodies, and to others — and this relationship is in urgent need of healing.

So many of us are malnourished in a society replete with food. But we need to understand nourishment in a context that goes beyond food and eating, and as something more than just a biological process. Most of the food-related issues we suffer from — obsessive dieting, poor body image, eating disorders, or overeating — can be traced to an emptiness inside, a disconnection from our personal sense of spirituality.

“When we've lost the spiritual connection in our lives, we may eat and eat in an attempt to fill our inner void,” write co-authors Lynn Ginsburg and Mary Taylor in their book, *What Are You Hungry For?* (St. Martin's Press, 2002). “But satisfaction comes only when we're able to rediscover our connection to whatever holds deepest meaning for us in life.”

How do we go about reconnecting? We can begin by remembering: It's not just what, but how we take in nourishment — at all levels — that affects our bodies, our emotions, and our spirit. Consider for a minute: How rushed are we when we eat? Are we actually missing the experience of our food even as we eat it? What else are we taking in with our meal? Do we eat in front of the computer or TV screen, or idly flipping through a newspaper or magazine? Do we savor the company of friends, appreciate the ambiance of the room, and reflect on the love with which the food was prepared and the joy with which it was served? Do we speak kindly and compassionately about others, or do we feed off gossip and juicy tidbits of information?

Do we stop when we're satisfied — not full, but satisfied and complete, that place where our physical hunger is appeased, where we can still appreciate the flavor of the food, yet not feel the need to consume to excess? Or, perhaps the inverse: Do we deny ourselves the very food — or other things — that would nourish us, in an attempt to live up to false ideals of how we should look or of what we're “allowed” to consume?

Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Naht Hanh speaks of nurturing our inter-connectedness by cultivating our awareness, not just of what we put in our mouths but of what we allow into our hearts during

mealtimes. “Some subjects can separate us, for instance, if we talk about other people's shortcomings. The carefully prepared food will then have no value if we let this kind of talk dominate our meal. The awareness of the piece of bread in our mouth is much more nourishing [when we practice kindness]. It brings life in and makes life real.”

Seeking Comfort

While food can bring us together and remind us of how we're all part of an ongoing cycle of life, it can also trap us into another kind of cycle — one of craving, self-loathing, disconnection, and unhappiness. Happiness in our society is often seen as satisfaction not only of our basic needs, but of false needs. And, ironically, when we become so full of what's unnecessary — or try so hard to deny what is — we have no space to allow something more meaningful to fill us. We feel unsatisfied with how we look and what we have, always hungry for something more.

North America, which exemplifies a consumer-driven society, is also one of the most spiritually starved — and spiritually seeking — societies. In its attempt to heal itself, it is also very quick to adopt a fast-track to what is perceived as bringing happiness and fulfillment: food, material goods, spiritual trends. Consider some facts: although thinness is valued, the majority of North Americans are obese or suffer from some kind of eating disorder; heart disease and stress-related ailments prevail; and more people use drugs regularly on this continent and suffer

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from some form of addiction or depression than in the rest of the world combined.

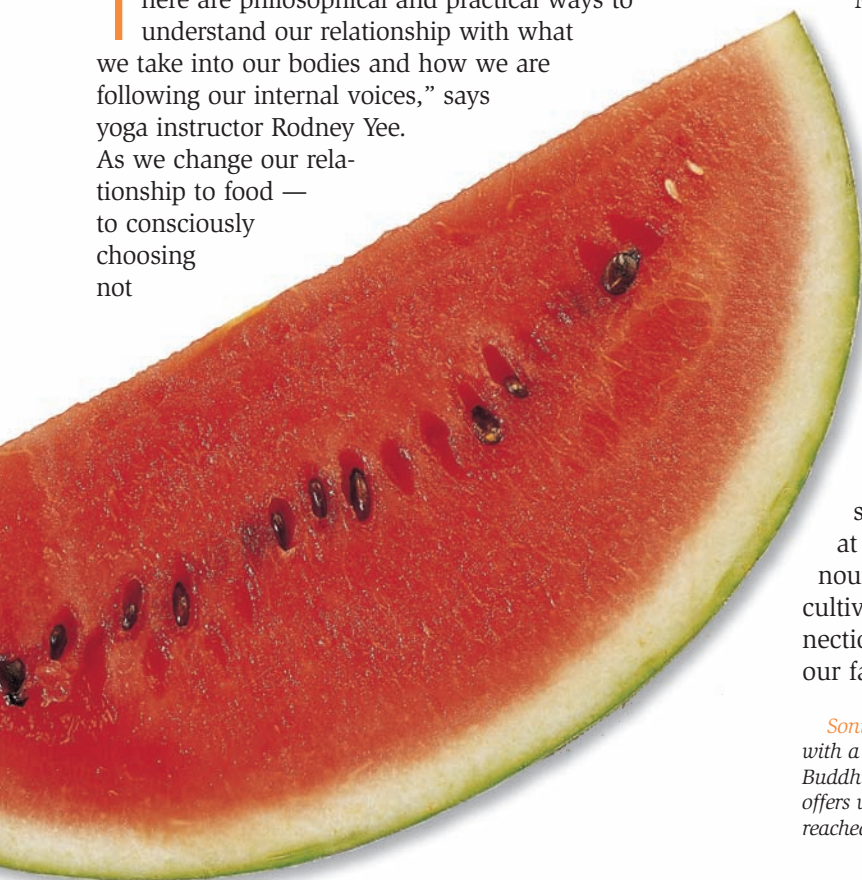
“Satisfaction has become saturation,” writes Serge Mongeau, author of *Voluntary Simplicity* (*Les Éditions Écosociété*, 1988). “Our consumer society always presents new needs to be satisfied, so we gorge ourselves but never feel fulfilled. We mistake the product we buy for the deeper qualities we’re searching for: security, love, comfort.”

We often mistake food for love or comfort. Though it may be prepared lovingly, it is not through food that we find love (or deny it to ourselves), but rather through nurturing a mindful relationship to all that we consume. Or, if we’re in the habit of denying ourselves food, to at long last giving ourselves permission to be truly nourished, to allow love to flow back into our hearts.

Our hunger and happiness cues have been so confused that we no longer know what we truly desire. We are market-driven and unsure where we’re driving, or being driven, to. We need to slow down, to truly feel again, to listen not just to what our bodies are hungry for, but to what our heart and soul yearn for. Is it another serving of food or the latest gossip, or are we lonely, hungry for touch and companionship? Or, is our hunger deeper still — maybe a desire for more meaningful work, for ways to satisfy our soul-expression through our body?

Mindful Eating and Living

“There are philosophical and practical ways to understand our relationship with what we take into our bodies and how we are following our internal voices,” says yoga instructor Rodney Yee. As we change our relationship to food — to consciously choosing not



simply what we eat but how we eat — it affects the quality of all our relationships and we learn to find satisfaction in ways that bring us more into harmony with our bodies and with our life. We begin to listen to what our heart hungers for and what our soul desires — and then our choices of what is nourishing expand and become more life-affirming. This helps us to better support our life energy, and the lives of others.

This is what living in harmony is about. As we feel more balanced, our choices become clearer. As we gain clarity, we feel more balanced and we honor both our body and the world which supports our life. We become kinder to others and to ourselves. We may seek out the support we need to heal or offer it to others in need. We start treating our inner and outer world with respect and love. If we love, we cannot harm or allow harm to occur: in our bodies or in our thoughts, in our relationships or in our world. It seems simple, but it took me years to truly embody this most basic of lessons, to allow my heart to open and my soul to be nourished, to let that love flow out to others — and to begin healing a family legacy.

It would be easy at this point to offer an exercise in mindful eating, a short meditation on being aware of flavors as we chew, swallowing each mouthful carefully, and appreciating the care with which the food was prepared and how it nourishes us in many ways. But, let’s try something other than focusing on food. How about noticing the many small ways we’re nourished throughout the day or how we nourish others?

Maybe we received a smile and friendly service, or we noticed the play of sunlight in the trees. Maybe we played with a child — or like one. Maybe we could try taking a different path home today and take the time to really notice people and things along the way, simply feeling the joy of having a healthy body that can walk this path and appreciate its beauty and have a warm home to which we can return.

Nourishment starts like this: Appreciating the simple things. This is how a deeper spiritual practice begins and how it continues: cultivating awareness, being grateful for what we have, and practicing compassion and self-love, day-by-day, hour-by-hour. The practice itself then becomes an offering, allowing us to open to more satisfying paths of fulfillment, to feeling nourished at a much deeper level, and to having others be nourished through our actions. Then we can begin to cultivate the very qualities we seek: love, caring, connection. Then we can begin to heal — for ourselves, for our families, for our world. 🍉

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