

Chapter 1

Why Do We Eat?

In many ways our relationship with food defines our relationship with life. From the moment we are born, we experience sensations of the body, and prevalent among them are the feelings of hunger or fullness. When our bladders or bowels are full, we naturally relieve ourselves with no need for outside intervention, though a dirty diaper may provoke a few cries of distress. But the sensations of hunger – these require the intervention and cooperation of some unknown from the outside world. Attached to the appearance of that source of benevolent comfort are the many associations we begin to link with its arrival. We could consider this experience in our early lives as the rudimentary touch of love. When we think of being nourished, we think of being cared for and of getting our needs met. The feelings of safety and satiety associated with these moments have both emotional and physical components.

For most, there is some sense of insufficiency in this department. Something seems lacking or we aren't getting enough of something. Whether this is reflected in eating more than we need and gaining weight, or in just feeling needy in relationships, these inadequacies play out in our daily lives in such a manner that we muck up our potential. The empty places inside yearn to be filled, and we spend an inordinate amount of energy both trying to get those needs met and hiding the fact that they exist.

The source of this predicament is often complex and deep.

If, as part of the overall experience of getting fed we also learn to expect anger, impatience or any other possible tension-provoking element, this association becomes a deep-seated part of our system. If, on the other hand, we find that the only time we experience the necessary sensations of being cuddled, held, cooed to and loved is when we are being fed, we learn to link our hunger sensations with that imprint by association. Eating, then, becomes that which equals nourishment of many types.

It is no wonder that by the time we have become our adult selves, we have a mixed bag of what eating represents. Through the years, we have also added to the mix our family's celebrations, rituals and customs, complete with mealtime rules and Aunt Matilda's grousing at us all the way through our plum pudding. Advertising is also a subtle but profound force in our lives. It is, of course, designed to make us think we need something we don't have. We become confused, thinking it is getting something that makes us feel good. This is not true. It is feeling lack of need – contentment – that makes us feel good. To the extent that our discontent is riled up by thoughts about things we don't really need, we tend to consume more than we need for our basic good health.

It's a confusing picture, often, when we try to sort out exactly *why* it is we eat what we do, never mind when and how and how much. We may recognize that eating, for us, has become something more complex than just satisfying the natural hunger that signals a need for more food to fuel and sustain our ongoing lives.

I start every series of Mindful Eating classes with a simple question: "Why do you eat – what is it inside that prompts you or propels you?" After a minute of confused looks and a couple of titters, the class invariably engages. The list usually has more than 30 items by the time we're done, and only seldom is "hunger" even mentioned. As we warm to the task, often participants will share more deeply the awareness gradually rising to the surface that traces their current motivations to aspects of their stuck past. The aspect that all items on the list have in common is that they provoke a sensation in the belly, whether it be emptiness or tension, that in some way mimics the sensation of hunger. This, then, defines the work for the rest of the class series, and will define the content of the bulk of this book. "Why *do* we eat?"

The lists that have been compiled over the past years in these classes are extensive, but the themes remain the same and can be grouped into several main categories. It turns out this is good information to have, since what primarily motivates one person may be different than what prods another, and the words of wisdom that sink in and "hit home" will be different for each individual.

I include information and exercises in this book that will help you discern your own personal motivators and the remedies that fit. This search becomes a lifelong process, however, in that food is the central component to so much of our lives that what we discover turns into an ongoing path of self-discovery. Welcome this. It is good, and at some point becomes easier as you simply accept the process for what it is.