

SvD NYHETER

Maria Carling interviews Dr. Lilian Cheung

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*I've read a lot about mindfulness and I know that it's scientifically proven that mindfulness can help many people with different problems but many of my colleagues and readers are still very skeptical.*

1. *Do you, being a Harvard professor, meet the same kind of skepticism towards mindfulness?*

LC: I did not know what mindfulness was until I ended up in my first retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh in 1997 in Key West, Florida. I was really surprised to find that of the nine hundred some participants in the retreat, most of them were psychotherapists. There I learned that psychotherapists and social workers were already applying mindfulness practice routinely to help their patients.

Each day of the seven-day retreat, I practiced mindful eating, mindful walking and mindful breathing. By the third day, I started to touch peace. For the remaining for days, I experienced almost no stress. By the end of the retreat, I felt total bliss -- I was completely stress-free! I do not remember ever feeling this way as an adult. Thich Nhat Hanh said at the end of the retreat, "Many of you may have touched peace in this retreat. But, if you do not continue to practice when you get home, you will lose this peace."

My personal experiential experience along with the published scientific studies on mindfulness have convinced me that I want to live mindfully as much as I can.

2. *What are the most important things that buddhism/mindfulness teach about eating habits?*

LC: Eating mindfully means that you are truly present with the food that you are eating. This means that *when you eat, only eat*. Do not eat with the T.V. on, checking emails on your cell phone, reading a magazine, or thinking about your projects or worries.

Eating mindfully is an enjoyable and meditative practice. Engage all your senses, not just taste. Appreciate the sight, smell, sound, and texture of the food as well. Honor the food by express your gratitude. One time-honored way to express gratitude is to recite a grace before eating, such as the Five Contemplations (available at our Savor website

<http://www.savorthebook.com/resource/The%20Five%20Contemplations>).

Furthermore, it is important for us to serve our food in modest portions, so that we can avoid waste and overeating. Savoring small bites, chewing thoroughly and eating slowly also help us to avoid overeating.

Another important practice is to eat a plant-based diet, which science has shown us is better for our health--and is also for the health of our planet. Having a big chunk of red meat as the center of the plate is not the way to go. The United Nation's FAO, in its 2006 report, *Livestock's Long Shadow*, has made a convincing case report by FAO of the United Nations already pointed out that livestock's negative effect on our environment is mass. For example, raising livestock is responsible for 18% of the world's total green house gas emissions, more than transportation. Furthermore, raising livestock uses 8 percent of our planet's water and contributes strongly to waste depletion and pollution. While all forms of livestock contribute to this problem, red meat by far is more resource-intensive than other forms of livestock.

*3. What is the first mindful exercise you'd recommend an average stressed person to do to start eating more mindfully?*

LC: Eat an entire meal without your T.V. on and without checking your smart phone. Take three in and out breaths before starting the meal so that you can be in the present moment and pay attention to your food. That way you will be able to truly savor the meal.

*4. How did you and Thich Nhat Hanh start working together?*

LC: Thich Nhat Hanh has always appreciated the contribution of science and how it affects our well being and the well being of our planet. He knew that I was (and still am) a nutritionist at Harvard School of Public Health.

In every retreat, he teaches people to eat mindfully. The total immersion of eating all meals in silence heightened my awareness of eating and appreciation of food. By my second retreat with him, I realized that we in nutritional sciences have been very productive in identifying "what to eat" to help people stay healthy. But, we fall short of helping people stick with science-based nutrition advice in their daily eating.

Mindfulness is an ancient time tested practice of over 2500 years, yet as I learned more about it, I realized that it could be one of the solutions to our modern-day obesity epidemic. The key is to integrate the ancient wisdom with the latest science on healthy eating. I wrote a book outline and presented it to Thay, asking him to write the Foreword. He was so interested in this concept that he decided to co-author *Savor – Mindful Eating, Mindful Life* with me. This is the first book that he has written with another author.

*5. What is special with his way of teaching mindfulness and eating habits and how does that correspond with your academic knowledge of nutrition from Harvard?*

LC: Knowing scientific facts is only the beginning and it is an important foundation. Practicing the science-based advice as a lifelong habit is key. Thich Nhat Hanh is an incredible teacher on practice. He as well as his monastics personify mindful eating and living. It is such a pleasure to see them eat, walk or do chores with such grace and attention.

6. Why did you start to practice mindfulness (incl mindful eating)?

LC: I started to practice mindfulness as I emerged from my first retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh in Key West, Florida. The bliss and peace that I felt during the retreat was memorable and transformative. I learned that there is a way of being that can bring us more joy and peace despite all the stress and chaos we face. Over time, I learned to be "the eye of the storm."

7. *How do you do it in your daily life? What does it mean to you?*

LC: I practice mindfulness throughout the day, including during the most mundane routines like brushing my teeth or walking down a hallway at my office. When I am stuck in a traffic jam, I breathe to refresh myself instead of getting irritated. Similarly, when I am waiting to pay my groceries at the supermarket or in the airport security line, I practice mindful breathing. There are many suggestions in chapter 7 of *Savor* for ways that people can integrate mindfulness practice throughout their daily lives.

As I increase my degree of mindfulness practice, I find myself enjoying whatever I am doing, right at the moment I am doing it. So I get more enjoyment out of each moment. I can do tasks without resistance, anxiety, or fear. I am more in the flow and more efficient. Living life this way is a joy!