

A person wearing a red robe is holding a wooden bowl filled with several ripe, dark red plums. The person's hands are visible, cradling the bowl. The background is a soft, out-of-focus red. The text is overlaid on the image in a white, elegant serif font.

eating the moment

141 mindful practices  
to overcome overeating  
one meal at a time

PAVEL G. SOMOV, PH.D.



~~“*Eating the Moment* is a quick, enjoyable read full of creative, clever exercises and insightful, thought-provoking text. Rather than being shamed into deprivation, readers are taught original exercises to help them learn about their palates and manage their appetites. Who knew that weight control could be so fun and empowering?”~~

—Dina Cheney, author of *Tasting Club*

“In *Eating the Moment*, Somov gives you the practical tools you need to reap the rewards of eating more mindfully. Read it and discover how to have a relationship with food that is smarter, healthier, more conscious, and enjoyable.”

—Deborah Kesten, MPH, author of *The Enlightened Diet*

“Somov is one of the most creative psychologists around. He is knowledgeable about research-based and effective therapy techniques. He is aware of Eastern philosophies, and Buddhism in particular. And he is a productive therapist who knows how to translate knowledge into personal action for clients. All of these gifts are evident in Somov’s book, *Eating the Moment*, which is not only informative, not only good reading, but also tremendously helpful in the most difficult area of behavior change—losing and keeping off weight.”

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—Donald Altman, author of *Meal by Meal* and *Art of the Inner Meal*



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# Introduction

Eating is complex. Overeating is even more complex. Both are problems. We have learned to solve the problem of eating with food. And we have learned to solve the problem of overeating with dieting. This book is about unlearning the solutions to overeating that have become problematic in their own right and about learning a habit of mindful eating. This book is for overeaters and overdieters.

## The Mindful-Not-Mouthful Approach Isn't a Diet But a Diet-Facilitator

The mindful eating (or, as I like to call it, the “mindful-not-mouthful”) approach is an awareness building and habit-modifying process for overcoming overeating; it is not a diet, at least, not in the modern sense of the word. The approach can be, however, used as a diet facilitator. Before I explain what I mean by the term *diet facilitator*, let me clarify what was originally meant by the word “diet.” *Dieta*, in Latin, means “a way of living.” Therefore, in its original meaning, a diet presupposes a *permanent* change in the way (or style) of life that preserves a way (or style) of life worth living. Geneen Roth, an anti-dieting pioneer and author of several best-selling books, suggests that for a diet to work, it cannot feel like a diet (Roth and Lamott 1999). While mindful eating can facilitate diet compliance, it is, at its basis, a *dieta*, a lifestyle or a way of living; by definition, it does not interfere with quality of life.

Most modern weight-management systems, known as “diets,” are not quite diets in this sense. These diets can be subdivided into two distinct components or phases: an *induction phase* and a *maintenance phase*. The induction phase is a blitzkrieg of nonliving that usually involves some kind of drastic restriction of foods and/or portion sizes. If endured, the induction phase results in a relative rapid weight loss. The maintenance phase is a recommended way of living that allows the dieter to maintain the target weight following the induction-phase weight reduction. With this distinction in mind, it could be said that the induction phase is not really a diet in the original sense of the word. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine anyone realistically maintaining an ascetic self-denying crash-diet regimen indefinitely and still call it “living.” The maintenance phase, with its long-term focus and with its more realistic degree of self-restriction, is closer to the original meaning of the word “diet.” The maintenance phase is not, however, what a typical overeater has in mind when he or she goes on a diet.

Most overeaters view dieting as the only solution and typically view it as a time-limited sprint toward weight loss, not a lifelong marathon toward health. As you go on a diet, you think tactically, not strategically: you are thinking not of a lifelong commitment to a particular way of living but rather, of mobilizing just enough motivation and self-discipline to endure a sprint of self-denial so that you can fit into a *reference-point piece of clothing*, such as a pair of jeans worn in high school or a wedding dress or that spring-break bikini from sophomore year of college. Again, the mindful-not-mouthful approach is not a diet, but it can be used as a diet-facilitator; it is an approach to living. The mindful-not-mouthful approach can be useful in facilitating both the induction and the maintenance phases of weight-management systems and other programs for overcoming overeating. Mindful eating, as a diet-facilitator, is a resource you can cultivate before you embark on another diet (should there be a need for another diet in your future).

## What to Expect and What Not to Expect

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As an overeater, you may have wondered, what do people who overcome their overeating problem have that you lack? Willpower? I don't think so. Mindful, conscious eating—like any habit—has a learning curve and is, therefore, predicated on either trial and error or guided preparation. Some former overeaters learned their lessons through dieting, in which each diet became a learning experience with its mishaps and revelations. Other former overeaters have sought professional help or read self-help books on overeating. Sooner or later, one way or another, people who overcome overeating develop a kind of personal eating know-how that consists of mindfulness and compliance strategies that allow them to adhere to their eating goals. The intent of the mindful-not-mouthful approach is to spare you the odyssey of trial and error.

In showing you these experiential shortcuts into mindful eating, I make the following promises. I will not ask you to count calories or to cut out any particular foods or to add any particular foods or to eat less or to eat more often or to exercise. Instead, I will be corruptly permissive. I will ask you to indulge yourself with new tastes and flavors. I will ask you to do strange but fun eating exercises. I will ask you to play and frolic with your food and your mind. Remember, you've got the rest of your life to overcome this problem! Kick back and find comfort in the notion that the success of the mindful-not-mouthful approach does not rest on willpower and self-discipline but on the profound human ability to reflect on your own experience, as it progresses, that is, on the capacity for mindfulness.

### **Should You Be Using This Book If You Are on a Diet?**

You know the cycle. Off another miracle diet for a few weeks, you have been “bad.” Whether or not you lost weight while on the diet, you are intoxicated with the regained quality of life and freedom to eat whatever and whenever. But the high of this freedom has been wearing off as your guilt and aesthetic aspirations start to poison the idyllic picture. A friend in the induction phase of her diet tells you about the pounds and inches she lost in just two or three weeks and suggests a book on the subject. Unbalanced or empowered by someone else's commitment and success, you venture out to your local bookstore. You browse around and stumble upon the title in question. You pick up the book, flip through it, and decide to buy it. This time, you are really going to do it. You pause for a moment thinking about all the other diet books and exercise videos you have bought over the years, but then, just like before, you rationalize the expense of the book as an investment in your health. At home, you sit down to read it and then binge during one last feast before the self-imposed famine. After all, it's just a few days, you will be “good” again and sticking to the plan. Finally, pushing away from the table, you set a start date for the next diet, and off you go on another vicious round of self-denial.

Let it be different this time, dear reader: set no start date and make no promises. You are on a break or on a vacation from your previous diet, and on a contemplative retreat before your next diet, if, in fact, there is one. As part of my psychology practice, I periodically perform pre-operative psychological evaluations for gastric bypass surgery candidates. These clients' accounts of how they lost and regained hundreds of pounds of weight over the years have confirmed for me a long-standing clinical and personal realization: one of the main reasons why diets typically do not work is because they are sudden and impulsive undertakings. There's no gradual change. There is no practice; just the application. We jump into the role of a dieter after reading the script only once, without rehearsing our stage lines. We go from nondieting to dieting, from out-of-control eating to overcontrolled eating.

expecting to have the best performance of our lifetime and the standing ovation of envious onlookers at the end. So, if you are planning to go on another diet in the future, consider the mindful-mouthful approach as a kind of experiential boot camp.

## Three Reasons Why We Eat

“Why do I eat?” This question, and not the questions “How much should I eat?” or “What should I eat?” or “When should I eat?” is the logical starting point for anyone who is interested in overcoming his or her overeating. As I pose this question, you may take offense to the seemingly rhetorical nature of this inquiry. “Well,” you might say, “I eat because I get hungry, to provide my body with energy. Congratulations, my fellow eater, and condolences at the same time! Congratulations for knowing the obvious and condolences for not living by the obvious. Yes, the grand biological idea behind eating is to pump fuel into our bodies to perform the functions of life. That is the theory! In practice, however, our reasons for eating often have nothing to do with the needs of our body. There are three reasons why we eat.

### **We Eat to Satisfy the Needs of the Body**

We eat out of *physiological hunger*, a straightforward, undeniable need for fuel that results in *physiologically triggered eating*, the sole purpose of which is to satisfy the needs of the body.

### **We Eat to Satisfy the Needs of the Mind**

We eat out of *psychological hunger*. Our minds need to be entertained, comforted, or distracted, resulting in *psychologically triggered eating*, the sole purpose of which is to satisfy the needs of the mind, even if the needs of the mind are satisfied at a cost to the body.

### **We Eat out of Habit**

We eat without hunger, out of habit, when we are triggered to eat by various environmental stimuli that have been repeatedly linked with the act of eating. This mindlessly initiated, reactive *environmentally triggered eating* mostly satisfies the insatiable food industry.

## Four Reasons Why We Overeat

Voracious appetites and metabolic and lifestyle differences aside, on a behavioral level, overeating is maintained by the following four aspects of mindless eating:

- mindlessness of the environmental triggers of eating
- mindlessness of the process of eating
- mindlessness of the sensations of fullness
- mindlessness of emotional eating



## Mindlessness Makes Sense, But Not in the Case of Eating

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On the surface of things, you might think that mindfulness is healthy and mindlessness is not. But you look behind the curtains, into the complex mechanics of human function, into the multitasking miracle of human life, you realize that mindlessness makes sense. We are self-programming biological robots (with or without a soul, depending on your philosophical-spiritual orientation). To spare our minds the constant trouble of deciding on a myriad of trivial choices, to conserve energy and to optimize performance, we automate ourselves. Eating is one such aspect of our functioning that we have automated. The problem with automated and, thus, mindless eating, however, is that conserving energy in today's sedentary world leads to obesity.

So as we focus on mindful eating, let us wave a fond farewell to mindless eating. After all, it is this mindless eating that helped us through many a business lunch where fully automated eating algorithms allowed us to skillfully handle pasta with red sauce only a foot away from the expensive table of a prospective boss while rattling off bulleted versions of our work lives. It is this mindless eating that allowed us to have many a dinner date where we eloquently navigated through the courses of our relationship history without so much as a wine stain on our evening wear. It is this mindless eating that has allowed our blindfolded fingertips to find the last cashew in a jar of mixed nuts without so much as pausing the movie scene of a blindfolded man chewing through the ropes that bind his hands. Let's face it: it's time to wave good-bye to mindless eating. We've had a good long run with it, a run that unfortunately slowed down to a walk, then to a crawl, then to a limp with overburdened, aching ankles as we gingerly tread the mill of the weight-management track.

## Mindful, Not Mouthful: Developing the Mindful-Eating Habit

The mindful-not-mouthful approach is designed to override the old habit of "if eat, then be mindless" with a new, more adaptive habit of "if eat, then be mindful." In a manner of speaking, the mindful-not-mouthful approach aims to automate mindfulness. Automate mindfulness? Isn't that a contradiction in terms? Not really. While the goal of making mindful eating a habit may seem paradoxical, it really isn't. The purpose of this book is to help you become habitually mindful of your eating, to get to the point where the decision to be mindful about eating is evoked mindlessly and automatically, effortlessly. Yes, I'd like for mindful eating to have the force of habit in your eating life. This kind of habit-forming or conditioning is how the book in your hands can help you make a lasting difference in your battle with overeating.

### The Aspects of Mindful Eating

For most of us, eating is a mindless, unconscious, reactive, compulsive, automatic, mechanical, thoughtless, habitual, hand-to-mouth activity. We are, in a manner of speaking, eating zombies. The overarching goal of the mindful-not-mouthful approach is to awaken and reprogram the eating zombie with a new habit of paying attention to external, or environmental, factors that trigger you to start or stop eating; to internal, physiological and/or psychological, factors that trigger you to start or stop eating; and to your process of eating. Put differently, the habit of mindful eating involves the following:

- habitual mindfulness of environmentally triggered eating

- habitual mindfulness of hunger and fullness
  - habitual mindfulness of the process of eating
  - habitual mindfulness of emotionally triggered eating
  - mindful (rather than mindless) emotional eating
- 

You will learn more about what all of this means in the chapters that follow.

### **From Knowledge of Mindfulness to Practice of Mindfulness**

Mindfulness and knowledge are different things. Knowledge is informational awareness. Mindfulness is experiential awareness. To know something is different from experiencing the same thing. In your self-help readings or treatment encounters, you may have come across the advice to eat mindfully or “slow down your eating and be conscious of taste.” Receiving this advice leads to informational awareness. Applying this advice creates experiential awareness.

I remember learning to do a backflip as a kid. First, I gathered information from my more acrobatic friends. Struggling for words and relying primarily on gestures and body language, they shared their know-how with me. Armed with this information, I tried doing a backflip and hurt myself a few times before I got it right. In retrospect, I realize that the information I gathered had essentially no value; when I tried to do a backflip, I was following no one’s blueprint but enacting a kind of intuitive kinesthetic visualization that I had in my mind long before I consulted my friends. Having materialized this kinesthetic vision, I had acquired experiential awareness of how a backflip is done, my own know-how of the backflip that cannot be adequately expressed in words.

Knowing that you need to be conscious of your eating or even trying a few times, according to someone’s prototype of mindful eating, is insufficient to change eating habits. And yet, informational awareness is a vital precursor of change. Without having the comfort of knowledge about how to do a backflip, I would have probably never attempted it. It is only when I thought I knew how to do it that I felt the confidence to try it, which opened the door into the series of trials and errors that eventually led to a successful landing on my feet. The intent of this book is to help you make the three-point journey from *knowledge* (of mindful eating) to *practice* (of mindful eating) to the destination *habitual application* (of mindful eating); the goal is to permanently awaken the overeating zombie.

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# No, It's Not the First Book on Mindful Eating

Don't get me wrong. The idea that mindless eating is one of the mechanisms of overeating is not original to this author. Various self-help authors have been offering the advice to eat mindfully. With a rare exception, however, the coverage of mindful eating has been mostly focused on becoming more mindful of the process of eating, typically in the form of such common sense advice as slowing down and taking time to savor your food. The mindful-not-mouthful approach uses mindfulness to manage overeating from a more panoramic angle and offers 141 awareness-building and habit-modifying exercises to provide an experiential journey into the essence of eating mindfulness. As such, this book goes a step beyond the regurgitation of classic Buddhist mindful-eating meditations.

## How to Use This Book

This book is a combination workbook and textbook. It's both hands-on and *mind-on*. The awareness-building exercises, flagged AB, highlight opportunities for mindfulness. Habit-modifying exercises, flagged HM, allow you to modify your eating habits. Some of the awareness-building exercises also may be used to modify your habits, and these are flagged as AB/HM. You can use this book in one of two ways. You can either follow the organization of the book, moving from theoretical rationale to exercises, or, if you wish, you can skip the salad course of theory and plunge right into the main dish of the exercises. The specific sequence of the chapters follows a certain logic designed to maximize your absorption of the material. With this said, however, feel free to roam through the book in random, as long as you expose yourself to most of the material. As with a circle, it does not really matter which way you go (left or right) as long as you get to go all the way around.

### Three Levels of Reading: Three Levels of Benefit

In reading this book, you may benefit at the following three levels:

**Knowledge level.** If you merely read this book without engaging in any of the exercises, you will develop a better understanding of the role of mindfulness in overcoming overeating and successful weight management. You will likely become less self-critical of your overeating and might develop insight into the problems with past diet maintenance phases. You stand a modest chance of using mindfulness to reduce overeating or of using mindful eating to increase regimen compliance in future weight-management attempts.

**Awareness-building level.** If you not only read this book but also engage in awareness-building exercises in mindful eating, you will have a better prognosis for reducing overeating in the long term. Furthermore, if you are on a diet while reading this book, you may use the awareness-building exercises as a kind of hand brake to help you stay on your diet.

**Habit-modifying level.** If you read this book and engage in both awareness-building and habit-modifying exercises, you stand to make the most progress in overcoming overeating. You may lose some weight while experimenting with the exercises, whether or not you are on a diet. Furthermore, you will also develop a personalized philosophy of eating that will serve to prevent relapses in

## A Note to the Skeptic

What type of reader will you be? How much effort do you think you will invest? To a large degree that depends on your level of skepticism. With this in mind, let me make the following point. From one skeptic to another: be skeptical of your own skepticism! I know just what you are thinking: here we go again, another behavioral banality. Do not rush to foreclose on the potential utility of this book. What gives? You've been struggling with overeating for a while, so chances are you will soon get on another diet. Before you do that, why not work on developing a habit of mindful eating which just might help you get more out of your diet, should you go on one? If you already are on a diet, then again, why not see if this mindful-eating stuff can help you get the most out of your current diet regimen? If you are in counseling, seeing a therapist (best contingency of all!), working on your overeating, you can share this book with your therapist as a resource for behavioral homework. And finally, if your skeptical hesitation is driven by a concern for the New-Agey East-meets-West implication of the title, please be assured that this book will not have you swallow koans and haiku for breakfast, but it will have you chew on a generous helping of practical ideas and behaviors.

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## A Note to e-Book Readers

Since you've bought the ebook version of *Eating the Moment*, you have direct access to the [Mindful Eating Tracker](#)—an online forum which allows you to share your mindful eating experiences. Just click the preceding link on your web-enabled browser or e-reading device to give it a try.



## But Everyone Else Was Eating!

### Becoming Mindful of Environmental Triggers of Eating

To review, people eat for three reasons: to satisfy the needs of the body, to satisfy the needs of the mind, and out of habit. But what's a habit? Any habit can be understood as a stimulus-response relationship in which a stimulus is an element of the environment that triggers us to respond in a previously conditioned, mindless manner. For example, since movie theaters traditionally sell popcorn and soda, we associate going to the movies (stimulus) with eating popcorn and nursing a giant soft drink (response). When we eat out of habit in response to an external trigger, our eating is initiated upon the demand of the environment. The environment demands that we eat now. And we mindlessly oblige. When we let the environment decide when we should eat, we are, in a sense, surrendering the sovereignty of our conscious choice over eating as well as our common sense. It takes the mindlessness of habit to justify paying six or seven bucks for a cup of ice cubes and a handful of popped corn kernels when we aren't even hungry!

### Eating Out of Habit Means Overeating

I owe it to you to make the following point painfully clear: Unless you are eating to satisfy the needs of your body, you are overeating. In other words, if you are eating out of habit, not out of hunger, you are eating more than you need. Wasn't so bad, was it? On to the next truism.

### Environmental Triggers Initiate and Maintain Overeating

Say a friend invites you out to eat. You aren't actually hungry but decide to go along. Once at the restaurant, the sights and smells provoke an intense appetite. "I am famished!" you proclaim, unaware of the hidden evolution of a want into a need. The dinner is over and you feel full, but your friend isn't finished. She wants to look at the dessert menu. Minutes later, seduced by the pictures of decadent desserts, your appetite is kick-started and you're plowing through a monster slice of Death-by-Chocolate. What happened? You saw something appetizing and developed a desire for it, a craving so strong that it had the conviction of hunger. Sound familiar? The point is that the environment (a combination of people, places, and foods) can both trigger us to eat when we are not hungry (initiating overeating) and maintain our eating past the point of fullness (continued overeating).

### Why Did You Eat Just Now?



We eat to satisfy the needs of the body, to satisfy the needs of the mind, and out of habit when triggered by environmental cues. In the week to come, explore your motives behind each eating episode. After you eat, ask yourself, why did I just eat? Was I actually hungry, or was I just triggered to eat by something in the environment? Did I eat to cope, to address my emotional needs? Keep track of the reasons behind your eating episodes. Write them down in a notebook. For example, if you ate out of hunger, note that your eating was “need based.” If you ate to deal with stress, note that you “ate to cope.” If you ate on a craving, after being triggered by an environmental cue, note that your eating was “environmentally triggered.” If several different reasons coincide, try to determine the primary motive for eating.

Share and track your insights with the [Mindful Eating Tracker](#).

## Why Are You About to Eat Right Now?



Before you eat, ask yourself the following questions: “Why am I about to eat? Am I actually hungry, or am I about to eat because I’ve been triggered by something in my environment? Am I about to eat as a way of coping?” After you clarify to yourself why you are about to eat, do the following: Eat. Or don’t eat. Recognize that right now you have an opportunity to make a conscious choice. At this point, that’s enough. Continue with this exercise for a week or for as long as it appears valuable to you.

## Hunger vs. Craving: What’s the Difference?

A craving is a pseudo-hunger signal that mimics hunger. Cravings prompt us to eat as if we were hungry when we actually aren’t. Hunger is a physiological need with a physiological signature, a state of body. Craving is a want, a psychological state, essentially a thought of desire, a motion of the mind. Hunger is generic: you need food, any food that’ll make hunger go away. Cravings are specific: you want a particular food. Tribble and Resch (1996) have aptly called cravings “taste hunger” (88). Hunger depends on your physiology. Cravings depend on the situational context. For example, if you weren’t hungry but, after passing a fast-food place, suddenly developed a desire to eat, the chances are that this was a craving and not a state of hunger. Your body probably didn’t change in the time that it took for you to drive past a fast-food billboard, but your mind easily could have. The exercises below will help you practice how to distinguish between hunger and cravings.

## Hunger Essay



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