The Raisin Eating Meditation

When experience is viewed in a certain way, it presents nothing but doorways into the soul.
Jon Kabat-Zinn

Saturday morning. Silence falls over the room as fifty people slowly put a raisin to their lips.

Jon Kabat-Zinn devised the Raisin Eating Exercise in his stress reduction seminar to give people a sensory experience of being mindful rather than just talking about it. Each person in the group will eat a raisin slowly and mindfully as a way to show them that meditation is not something that is mystical or otherworldly. On the contrary, mindfulness meditation is about being grounded and fully present in the here and now—in the midst of our complex lives.

As the raisins are passed out, Tim gives instructions: “Take one small raisin and begin by experiencing it fully with all of your senses. Feel it with your fingers, look at its peculiar wrinkly shape with your eyes, smell the faint scent, place it on your lips and really feel it, and finally taste it. But don’t start chewing right away. Take the time to just feel it in your mouth, moving it around with your tongue and noticing the textures and everything else.”

Each person will experience eating a single raisin in a different way. Sue, who has a diagnosis of multiple myeloma, and who has already outlived her doctor’s predictions by years, looks like a little girl brimming with delight as she rubs the raisin against her lips. Kathy, a former executive who faces a dual diagnosis of liver disease and Hodgkin’s lymphoma, has a peaceful, almost sacred look on her face as she closes her eyes and slowly moves the raisin around in her mouth.

Everyone is being drawn deeply into the sensations generated by millions of nerve endings in the lips, nose, and mouth. In the one-pointed attention of eating a raisin mindfully, faces soften as the cares of the world fall away. An energy of simple joy pervades the room.
After a few minutes Tim rings little Tibetan cymbals to mark the end of this short meditation. Looking to the group he asks “So, what did you notice?”

People slowly shift from a contemplative inner feeling to the very different activity of putting that experience into thoughts and words. The deep silence fades as the noise in everyone’s mind starts up again.

The first one to speak is Julian, a tall man sitting at the back of the room. He has incurable prostate cancer and has continued to practice meditation throughout his journey. He holds his arms out as wide as he can and says, “My raisin was THIS BIG.” The group laughs in appreciation.

Tim responds, “That’s great. The bigness of your raisin attests to the bigness of your mindfulness. The attention that you put into it is really what makes the difference.”

Diane, a bright-eyed woman undergoing chemotherapy for ovarian cancer, chimes in, “There is such a difference in texture between the outside and the inside of a raisin. At first, when I rolled it around, it was very rough, hard, and dry, but I could feel that there was fruit on the inside. Then, when I slowly bit into it, the inside was very fruity, moist, and soft. I could taste the grape that is now inside the raisin. That’s something I hadn’t noticed before.”

“Aha!” Tim smiles. “Isn’t that interesting? So much experience in just one little raisin.”

Cory chimes in with the next observation. A 75-year-old woman with soft rosy cheeks, warm eyes and a lilting Dutch accent, she spent seven years nursing her husband through multiple myeloma before being diagnosed with breast cancer herself. A broad smile appears on her face. “I love raisins. I never really realized how rough a raisin is - when you wrap your tongue around it, and really feel all those little ridges, it’s really rough. Usually I just take a handful and, bingo, they’re gone!”

“So you experienced the roughness and the wrinkles?” Tim asks. “Yes,” she continues. “Those wrinkles on the raisin, they reminded me of my face!” The whole group bursts out laughing.

“You’re gorgeous!” Tim adds. “You have a beautiful face.”

Next, a woman with short red hair and dark glasses sheepishly admits, with a wide grin, “I don’t think I stayed in the present, because the raisin kept reminding me of the raisin cake my mother used to make. And rice pudding with raisins. I just kept thinking of food.” There is more laughter as many participants acknowledge having a similar experience.
Tim points out, “So that’s something interesting to notice also. We can be mindful of our mind as it pulls us into memories and away from sensing the raisin in the present. You can be mindful of your memories, taking you out of the present for an instant, but if you can pay attention to that as it happens, then your mindfulness is still present. You can observe the memories. You may know of the book ‘The Remembrance of Things Past’, by Marcel Proust, where just one little memory takes him off for 200 pages of flashbacks, and then finally he comes back to the initial moment.”

The next person to speak is a woman with breast cancer, sitting behind a walker, who shared her religious beliefs with the group during opening circle the day before. “I was just wondering if anyone remembered to say grace before they ate their raisin?”

Tim responds to her question about grace. “I like to say that mindfulness is the opposite of taking things for granted. We go through most of our lives in a trance-like state, half asleep. We look at our watch, impatiently counting the hours and thinking, ‘Ho hum. Another day.’ We don’t realize what a miracle it is simply to be alive, breathing fresh air and getting enough to eat each day. So many conditions have to come together in just the right way to make this moment of life possible.

“When we are mindful, we align ourselves with the natural sacredness of things just as they are. We can eventually recognize that existence itself is a state of grace, and gratitude becomes our path toward natural appreciation and joy.”

Then a cheerful woman with an English accent excitedly adds, “I think I can see great diet success with this mindfulness approach. I felt almost the same intensity with one raisin as eating my favourite Christmas pudding. I love Christmas pudding, and I could have eaten a whole bowl full of it in the same time that it took me to get the same pleasure out of that one raisin. Now that is a diet success.

“Great point,” Tim responds. “I think mindfulness is probably one of the most important things for nutrition and dieting and for taking good care of your body. Your body knows what’s good for you and how much is good for you. Isn’t it wonderful that, with more attention, you can get as much pleasure out of one raisin that you might get from a dish that has hundreds more calories? With mindfulness, one raisin becomes a great dessert.”

Cynthia nods in agreement. Neatly dressed, with close-cropped curly blond hair, she had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer just over a year ago. Earlier in the weekend she had expressed to the group how afraid she
has been, and how much she has felt that cancer “shakes up your whole world”. She speaks slowly in a soft and melodic voice. “I think often, with food, I have cravings, and when I try to satisfy that craving, I eat. But then when the food is gone, I’m still dissatisfied because I want more. I think a lot of that has to do with not paying attention to what you are doing when you are actually eating in the first place, so, when it’s finished you are still craving.”

Tim continues. “Never really being satisfied is a common theme in our society. As soon as something is finished, we want another experience to satisfy our constant craving. Craving itself has become a habit, irrespective of what we are craving. Even when we get what we want, we start to think that maybe that is not quite what we wanted and again we are dissatisfied. We end up constantly grasping at the outside world, looking for it to fulfill a yearning within us that, perhaps, it cannot fulfill.

“Where does real contentment come from? Perhaps, if we receive reality as it unfolds, with mindfulness, we might find that it is already enough - it fulfills us. We yearn for this simple contentment: to be at peace, to be satisfied, to feel good with things just as they are. Yet contentment is an attitude that we can cultivate from the inside. This key ingredient to fulfillment is so simple it is easy to overlook.”

Joyce speaks next. A small woman with stage three colon cancer, she looks as if she has the inner strength of a pioneer. “I think part of the pleasure, for me, was that we were all doing the same thing at the same time. I think so much of our experience is different for all of us at any given moment. Whereas just now, eating that raisin in silence together, just for that short time, there was community. Even though we were probably all thinking different things while chewing, still we were in communion with one another.”

“That’s a wonderful observation,” Tim responds. “I actually had that same thought: that when you synchronize everybody together, doing the same thing at the same time, a kind of oneness of mind happens. Similarly, that is why group meditation practice is powerful. A feeling of true community is something we all need more in our lives. It is healing to feel part of something that is alive and vibrant, growing and evolving—something bigger than ourselves.”

Nancy speaks next. She is struggling in her recovery from a rare gynecological cancer. She has recently been laid off from her job and admits to struggling in her relationships. She is alone and very much wants a life partner and a fulfilling career, but all this has been put on the back
with her treatment. Now, with cancer, her whole world seems to be caving in on her, yet she bravely goes forward. “Savouring that raisin, for me, was a reminder to savour life.”

The group is perking up. Tim continues “It is so true; every moment of our life is just like that little raisin. Each moment has so much to offer. Every moment of our life is full of potential richness, insight, and wisdom – if we’re really paying attention.

“It’s like a good novel. Good writers are mindful of the details. They live their lives the same as we do, but they are noticing things carefully and they don’t take the little things for granted. They pick up on the quirky connections between what might otherwise seem meaningless. In their writing, they extract from those little details all this fascinating meaning – meaning that seems hidden to most of us. Whether the story or the novel is dark and painful or pleasant and celebratory, tragic or comic, it doesn’t really matter. We still read it or we watch the movie because the writer has been mindful of the details and has thereby drawn out the truth and fullness of life. We can do that too. We can live our lives with that same kind of artfulness and deep meaning.”

The next morning, during ‘check-in’ period, Kathy, the semi-retired executive, started the group discussion, “What I kept going over last night was the raisin exercise. I thought about eating that raisin. And you’d think it was just a raisin, for heaven’s sakes! But it was much more. It was Christmas pudding, a lesson in gratitude, a flashback in a novel, and a long, long moment of ecstasy. During supper last night, not only was I enjoying the food more, but every moment seemed like it could expand for me. Every moment, every relationship, every conversation can be like that. Dying is not my biggest fear—it’s not having lived. That’s huge for me.”

Cynthia added to Kathy’s insights. “Sometimes something as small as a raisin can shift your whole view of life and remind us that our experiences are always two-sided. On the one side, there is the pain of dealing with cancer physically and mentally. There is the doubt, the fear, and all the things that go along with the diagnosis.

“On the other side, cancer has been a huge gift. Sometimes that gift is being in a state of grace – grace to be mindful of the love that people bestow on us, and mindful of our friendships.”
“We can learn to have the gratitude for the world that we live in, the beauty that surrounds us in every single day—to fully experience that, like we did with that little raisin. Just imagine being mindful of the gift that is this life, this world and especially the people we share our lives with from day to day. A little dried-up raisin can be a beautiful thing.”