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A READER'S JOURNAL

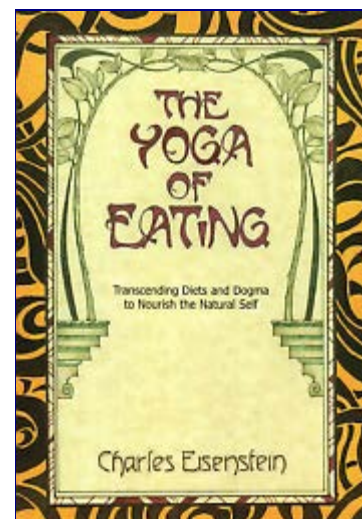
The Yoga of Eating
by
Charles Eisenstein

**Transcending Diets and Dogma
to Nourish the Natural Self**

Published by New Trends Publishing, Inc/DC in 2003

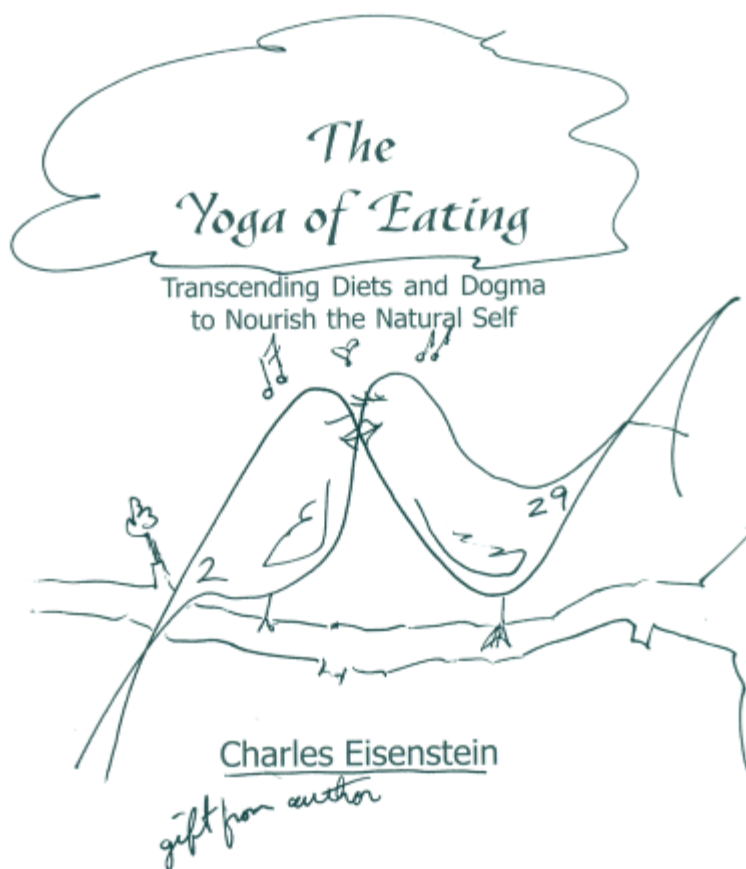
A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2004

Normally I avoid books about nutrition or diets like the plague, not plague the disease but plague the locusts, which like their biblical counterparts, have descended *en masse* upon the American populace and



eaten up every bit of common sense in sight. The subtitle of this book intrigued me — would the author be able to carry off talking about eating and nutrition without becoming bogged down in diets and dogma? My question was soon answered and there is some good news and some other news, which I'll explain as we proceed.

First the good news. I like the author. As I usually do when reading a new book, I date-glyphed the main title page on the day I received the book in the mail. My date glyph for 2004 has evolved into a pair of birds sitting on a limb, nuzzling each other and singing. Also note the yin-yang shape of the birds: if you place the belly of the male bird on the back of the female bird, you get a nearly circular shape. When I draw a date glyph, it not only records the date, but it also records my feeling state at the time I drew it. My feeling state was optimistic and singing as I opened this book. At last, I was thinking, someone will add some common sense to eating! I was not disappointed by the author's effort, and in the course of this review I hope to shore up those places where the weight of diet and dogma nonsense threaten to undermine the foundation of his work.



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"Oh, I could diet if I only had enough willpower!" How many of us have had or heard that thought expressed by someone else? As if willpower were some magical power that just descends upon us and makes it possible for us to do something that would else be impossible. It's true that willpower allows us to do what is otherwise impossible, but waiting for such willpower to descend out of the blue is a fruitless endeavor. If you wish fruit from a tree, you will have to exert the willpower to plant the tree.

[page 4] Reliance on willpower reveals a profound distrust of one's self.

This is a curious statement, but it applies to many people who "seem to think that what they really want to do must be bad, indulgent; therefore they must exercise willpower to enforce better behavior." When they allow that attitude to fill their lives, they are constantly "shoulding on themselves" and allowing their willpower to hover over them as a tyrannical parent with a switch threatening to lash out if they fail to follow its orders. Unfortunately such orders comprise a thicket of maps of what they ought to do formed from that plague of locust-like books and advice from well-meaning friends. No one can navigate through that thicket without getting more lashes than would come from that parental switch! All the while, inside, their body knows what is the right and wrong thing to eat, if only they would listen to it. Eisenstein uses a wonderful euphemism for running the gauntlet of the thicket of maps: "times of imperfect clarity."

[page 4] The proper function of willpower and self-discipline is to extend wisdom and insight into times of imperfect clarity; to remember and apply the messages of one's inner voice.

In other words, throw away other people's maps and pay attention to your own territory! Smell, taste the food carefully — when you buy it, when you prepare it, when you eat it. When you cook it, think good thoughts about those you're cooking the food for — those thoughts will be taste-able in the food. When you're eating, don't talk, eat. Naturally with friends, some light conversation during a meal is inevitable and enjoyable, but keep the business or serious talk till afterwards. When you follow these simple instructions, your body will be well-prepared for all stages of digestion of the food you eat and your post-prandial experience will be as enjoyable as your pre-prandial one.

Whatever you do, during a good meal, do *not* talk about bad food you had somewhere else! As silly as it sounds, and as much as it pains me to even mention this, this happens more frequently than it should. If you don't think it does, just listen and watch for it the next three times you eat out with friends. It doesn't happen to me as much as it did when I first began noticing the phenomenon because I immediately stopped eating with any person or class of persons that had previously exhibited that behavior or was likely to in the future.

Eating is *not* self-denial, by the way. It is the opposite of self-denial — it is self-gratification. It is the feeding of the self and should be done as gently and thoughtfully as you would feed a child you loved dearly. It is learning when the child has eaten enough nutrition for its body and stopping at that point. Who would force a child to eat more than it wanted? Nobody. And yet if some miscreant did do that, the child would soon grow overweight and accept the excess of food as its right. What would you do to correct the situation? You would reduce the amount of food you place in front of the child and encourage it gently to leave the table when they have eaten that food. Contrary to how young parents act today, children cannot eat unless you as a parent allow them to. They cannot go to the grocery, buy food, stock the pantry and the fridge on their own. Unless you collaborate with the child's wishes to overeat and stock the house with foods they love, children will not overeat even when you're not around. Treat yourself as if you were a small child and stock your pantry and fridge with foods that are good for you and which you enjoy eating in moderation and which by the very nature of the foods discourage binge eating, especially as you start a reduced food regimen.

It is a demonstrable fact that people of all ages, from infants to seniors, are eating more food than their bodies need. As soon as you bring your food intake into line with your bodies needs, your weight will reduce itself over time to an acceptable level. Imagine your resistance if some tyrannical parent were forcing you to carry a backpack with thirty pounds of books in it every hour of the day! Especially if you were no longer in school! That's exactly what you are doing to yourself if you continually overeat and carry around thirty extra pounds.

The middle-age bulge is well-known. Sometime back I found out the simple reason for those extra pounds that seem to puff up the bodies of nearly everyone as soon as they pass thirty: the human bodies

metabolism slows down dramatically at thirty years old! What is metabolism? Just the amount of calories your body burns up per unit time. Eat the same amount of and perform the same activities and your body will add those thirty pounds which for most people are so hard to remove. Why are those so hard to remove? Because the person knows that they're not eating more or doing less exercise. "It's not fair," they think and their response to the world's being unfair to them is to continue eating the way they did before.

Given these little facts I have placed before you, some of you will be sharpening up your will power to reduce weight. That's starting at the wrong end. You might start by reading this book -- that's a much better start, especially if you allow your reading this book to dissolve all the dieting and nutritional dogma that have built up the thicket of maps. Start anew. And you won't need an iron will to do this, in fact, an exerting an *iron will* will get in your way.

[page 5, 6] And even if you had an iron will, what a shame it would be for eating to become a regimen of self-denial! So many diets are defined by what you cannot eat. Who would not find the words "Yoga of Eating" intimidating? They seem to suggest a kind of discipline, purity, or austerity. It is significant that the very word "diet" in our culture has come to mean a diet of restriction — usually to lose weight. And so you may think that the Yoga of Eating is yet another chore, an incursion of self-denial into one of life's great pleasures.

Note: it's really an incursion into the perverse pleasure of self-flagellation which equates to being on a diet for most people. On the other hand, the author tells us yoga means "union".

[page 6] Not so! Given the futility of coercive willpower, the Yoga of Eating offers an alternative: to align joyful, nurturing eating with the authentic needs of body and soul. To bring into alignment, into union, what you need and what you crave, what your body wants and what you actually eat. And, to integrate your diet with other life directions and your role in the world.

And whatever you do, don't read a self-improvement book. Yes, I understand that Eisenstein has written what many would consider a self-improvement book; it might even be found in that section of a bookstore. Is the Yoga of Eating a self-improvement book or isn't it? How can we understand this paradox?

[page 12] And so each of us, to a greater or lesser degree, picked up the habit of self-improvement. Self-improvement is an appealing but malignant idea, a poignant self-rejection of our innate goodness. It means that we have accepted and internalized those messages of deficiency, laziness, and sin. [RJM: the thicket of maps] Sometimes people take up a strict diet in hopes of therefore being good, deserving, or pure, thus establishing a tendency to withhold from themselves what they really want or need. Even without this tendency, because our conventional dietary recommendations are a confusing mishmash of shoulds and shouldn'ts that seemingly have little to do with our desires as expressed in the body, a diet of self-improvement inevitably becomes a diet of self-denial.

Consider this a self-alignment book, instead. Learn how to align what you eat with what your body wants to nourish it. Eisenstein and I are both writing here about how we eat, what suits us, and if some of this rubs off on you and you suddenly begin eating what suits you, don't blame us if you suddenly find yourself sans the thirty-pound backpack as you walk around the world. We are not preaching to you about what to eat, but merely taking the advice of Epictetus (from top of Chapter 4): "Preach not to others what they should eat, but eat as becomes you, and be silent."

Everything was going well until Chapter 4 Food and Personality built up such a thicket of maps that I'm not sure where to swing my machete first. I give Eisenstein credit, he gives the hierarchy of vibrations and calls them "dangerously misleading." This is the map of which foods have a higher or lower vibration

depending on such maps as density of nutrition, place in food chain, degree of consciousness of being killed, and efficiency of conversion of sunlight to energy. It's hard to turn one's head around in thicket without being scratched. But the author makes a broad opening for us in this next passage:

[page 18] There is a fatal flaw in the logic of elevating oneself spiritually by elevating one's diet. The flaw is revealed in the following saying: "You cannot change one thing without changing everything." To be sustainable and health-giving, our diet must harmonize with our manner of being in the world.

Imagine that! The world is a system, our body is a system. We cannot change our diet without changing our set of friends, our family's grocery buying and food preparation habits, our recreational activities, our work environment, the method of production of food, in other words, without changing the *whole world*. Chew on that thought a while.

Now for the other news I spoke of earlier. The author has us imagine one head of broccoli grown in an organic garden and the other one grown in a farm and harvested by "exploited migrant labor". He goes on to tell us that he can taste the difference in the two heads of broccoli. Here's the problem I have with this thought. He likes the taste of the organic broccoli better than the one picked by the exploited migrant laborer. Somehow he imagines that the vibrations of the unhappy laborer are picked up by the head of broccoli and he can taste it when he eats it. Let's say that I agree with him — vibrations of the person who harvests the food I eat can be tasted. My problem is this: I understand that migrant farm laborers go to great difficulty just to get a job in the USA, often traveling a thousand miles or more to pick broccoli. They are happy to have this job or they would choose to stay home where they would be happier. The result is that when I taste the broccoli, I detect happiness in it. Same laborers can pick Eisenstein's broccoli and my broccoli and mine will taste better.

Let's go into this process a little deeper, if you will and even if you won't. If you won't, I understand, just close the book or click to another webpage. Bottled water. I don't like water that has been through dirty underground places — no telling what kinds of foul stuff exist underground and that water has flowed through it. They expect us to drink this stuff? To *pay* for the privilege of drinking it! Why — I've tried that spring water stuff — it's completely tasteless! One bottle tastes just like another. In fact, all the bottled water I've drunk doesn't taste as good as my favorite water which comes out of the Mississippi River and flows right through my faucet. Very convenient, too, and at a tiny fraction of the cost of the tasteless bottled stuff. Heck, they even did a blind taste test of tap waters from around the country and New Orleans water came out on top. That infuriated those who claim their water comes from these grody underground spring things, and they demanded a recount, but they were just sore losers, in my opinion. What bottled water companies are selling, at a tidy profit, and deluded Americans are buying hand over fist, is words, rightly understood. Slap some sparkling descriptive words like "deep, sparkling, mountain spring water" with a fancy place name like Evian or Perrier or Cascade and people will taste the difference just as Eisenstein does with his exploited broccoli.

Look out around you now — I hope the thicket of maps has cleared a bit for you. Taste the world. Don't be like the man who went to Antoine's gourmet restaurant in the French Quarter in New Orleans, ate the menu, and complained about the taste. In the Norwegian Boy Scout Handbook in the section on map-reading is this great advice, very valuable advice, when you are wandering around in a country where the next step may plunge you a thousand meters into an icy fjord, "When terrain differs from the map, believe the terrain." Or to quote the famous humorist Mark Twain whose words begin Chapter 9: "Be careful about reading health books. You may die of a misprint."

[page 84] When I urge you to trust the body's authentic hunger, please realize that this hunger is itself a response or adaptation to the conditions, both material and psychological, under which you live. Sometimes, the conditions to which obesity is a response are written into one's physiology on a genetic level.

And sometimes they are written into one's physiology on a doylic level. Genetics is the study of physical body traits and [doyletics](#) is the study of physical body states. Genetic memory is stored at the time of conception when the strands of DNA are sorted into place. Doylic memory is stored during every event that occurs to you before you reach five years old. If you were an only child and your mother took care of you every day, if you were hungry, she would probably feed you before you ever had a chance to cry for food. If she became busy with household chores and didn't notice you were hungry, you might begin to cry and she would drop her mop or turn down the fire on the stove and come to feed you immediately. Then one day, her entire routine is changed: a new child is born who requires constant attention. And her attention to your younger sibling cannot be as easily interrupted as her mopping or cooking. So one day, you cry for food, and she is unable to come running with a bottle. So you cry more and more and soon your stomach is not only empty of food, but all the muscles of your abdomen are cramped from the crying. These physical body states are stored in your limbic system: abdominal cramps and empty stomach. This event only has to happen once to cause this doyle, this physical body state to be recapitulated for the remainder of your lifetime. The result is that when your stomach becomes empty, you get abdominal pains which we, unaware of their origin, call variously, "hunger pains" or "hunger pangs". We know full well, from lifelong experience that these pains indicate we are hungry and if we only eat something right away, they will go away.

But these hunger pains are merely instances of doylic memory being activated. They are *not* authentic signals of bodily hunger, merely a signal of an empty stomach like you had as a child, not an authentic signal of the body's need for nutrition. If you [trace](#) and erase the hunger doyles, then you will discover, you will uncover for the first time, how to "trust your body's authentic hunger" as Eisenstein suggests you do in the quoted passage above.

Our body needs fat in order for us to survive. Stop eating fat and you will experience an enormous craving that will overcome any iron will. I first became aware of this process when in 1971 or so, I read "Never Cry Wolf" by Farley Mowat. He was studying the diet of wolves in the far Arctic regions. Wolves in the deep of winter seemed to have no other diet than mice, so he began eating only what he saw the wolves eating to see how it would affect him. Well, he soon developed this enormous fat craving. He could not find any source of fat in the wolves diet and he was stumped. Until . . . the thought came to him, "I have not been eating the guts of the mouse." He had been carefully discarding the fat-rich portions of the mouse that the wolves ate along with the rest of the mouse. So he started eating the rest of the mouse also and soon his fat craving went away and he had proven his scientific thesis that wolves did not live off of reindeer, but rather off of mice, especially so in the dead of winter when reindeer are elsewhere.

Eisenstein's title for Chapter 14 is "Fat and the Good" and he extols the importance of fat in a diet. Our body will crave fat if we deny it fat, but if we eat the appropriate amount of fat, it will be beneficial to our health and make it possible for us to eat smaller amounts of food, and most importantly to those who are beginning a eating-what's-good-for-me diet, they will not get a fat-craving which will drag them into a feeding frenzy.

So, to wrap it all up - avoid the thicket of maps, avoid advice from others (including me and Eisenstein), and avoid fad diets of all kinds. Eat less as befits your age and your body's needs and let your body be your guide, not some words in somebody's book. Think good thoughts when you select and prepare foods, and especially when you cook them. Avoid eating at places when 18-year-olds who would rather be skiing are preparing your food without ever thinking about the food. And enjoy your food in silence, tasting every precious bite.

