



## Body Wise

By Kamalamani

# Consuming Passions

“To lose confidence in one’s body is to lose confidence in oneself.”

Simone de Beauvoir (2010, 355).

“I'm learning how to taste everything.”

Laurie Halse Anderson (2014, 276)

I've puzzled over the psychology of food, body image, female identity, and sexuality since I was little. I grew up with a beautiful mother and grandmother who were absorbed by fashion and being attractive. The language around food consisted of 'being good' versus 'being naughty'. As a girl, I found fashion and food pretty boring; I was a tomboy, roaming the countryside and trotting around on borrowed horses, enjoying freedom and wildness. Freshly-groomed horse was my favourite smell, rather than Chanel No. 5. Fashion-conscious wise, I was a bitter disappointment to my elegant female folk.

These days I am repeatedly saddened by the self-hatred and self-harming of so many of my female clients, and a few of the male ones. I'm sickened by the suffering of teenage girls

and the rising numbers of boys who are starving themselves, some to death, whilst millions of other humans in the world are dying of malnutrition, against a backdrop of rising obesity. The politics of food and confusion around eating, consumption, and nourishment have never been more bewildering in a world full of beings hungry for love and connection.

**In writing this article,** I find it impossible to talk about the psychology of food without touching on the themes of body image, gender, and identity, and notice the old echoes of fear and shame that go with this territory. I know I'm not alone in this; in fact, I'm in good company. I haven't met many women who grew up with a healthy, balanced attitude to food, eating, and their bodies. I've met a few women who reached womanhood largely unscathed but sadly they're in the minority.

**Since my girlhood,** I've been familiar with the latest fad diets. I witnessed my Mum's valiant efforts with the: Mayo diet; F plan; and Hip and Thigh diet, to name but a few. I became a child-expert in food-as-the-currency-of-love through day-to-day culinary interactions with my grandmother. Woe betide anyone who didn't clear their plates and come back for seconds. Food was not only the currency of love but sadly a powerful bartering tool in the love-hate relationship between my mother and grandmother, who traded quite ferociously.

**Then puberty happened.** I realised, with some shock and resistance that my body was changing, and I, too, was expected to join the world of women. I wasn't ready to swap my wellington boots for heels and handbags so I didn't. But, I did realise I was severely ill-prepared for understanding the unspoken

**This messy thinking** and armored defense was compounded by a routine visit to my local doctor. He confirmed what I already feared in my belly: I was 'socially unacceptable' – I was a stone and a half overweight. In fact, his full verdict was that: "*it's socially unacceptable for a teenage girl to be overweight.*"

**He didn't ask me** about eating habits, or exercise, or nutrition. Instead he lectured me about social unacceptability. I failed to check out what his judgment would have been had I been a teenage boy.

**What was also** emerging for me at that point was a genuine interest in nutrition and the workings of the body. Studying biology, and later for an exam in nutrition and cookery, I was fascinated by nutrition and health. I also realised that I was a good cook, which remains a creative, relaxing outlet. I was amazed by the workings of the body. I loved the intricate diagram-drawing of biology classes and have memories of crazy experiments, in particular, boiling a peanut in a test tube to find out its calorific value. Not long

afterward, I decided to become vegetarian and became increasingly interested in the ethics of food and eating.

**It has taken me** the best part of three decades to unlearn some of my distorted behaviour around food and eating and to notice how I used food



Sketches drawn and donated by Kamalamani

assumptions and expectations of what it means to be a woman and how muddled that was in my head: a rich cocktail of food, nourishment, body image, love, and nascent sexuality. My embodied defense was the layer of retained puppy fat between me and the world keeping others, particularly the opposite sex, at bay.

in ways other than for nutrition. I picked up much more about body image, the ideal weight, and 'good' and 'bad' foods, rather than nutrition and how to eat: eat when you're hungry and stop when you're belly starts to tell you it's full. Eat what you're body wants to eat, rather than what your head is craving or what's on the adverts. Eat a balanced diet and don't snack between meals. Eat because you're hungry, rather than because you're sad and alone. The rules are quite simple in theory but so much harder in practice if you've grown up in an environment of confusion.

**Understanding eating seems** to be a lifelong voyage and interest. Last year, recovering from a debilitating virus, I completely lost my appetite. I didn't want to eat and felt sick. I listened to my body, and my body told me what to eat. Mouthful by mouthful, I started eating again. Although, I have found my taste for caffeine and sugar have dropped away. In that phase, I realised, perhaps for the first time, that I could eat *exactly what I wanted* to eat. How embarrassingly obvious, yet it hadn't been at all obvious to me until that moment, despite the work I've done. This powerful realisation was helped by the care of my partner who would nip to the shops to buy whatever my body wanted. I was spoilt and nurtured like never before.

**These days** I'm happy to inhabit a middle-aged body. I'm happy to care more about what I put into my body and how much sleep I get rather than burning energy worrying endlessly about how I mightn't measure up to someone else's image of female beauty. This middle-aged body has a few battle scars, but we're no longer at war. I love it more than I ever have before, and I love the fact that me and my body's storehouse of experiences are able to support others in getting into deeper relationship with their own embodied experience in healing wounds. And I'm on good terms with

my Mum; she does her thing, and I do mine (and she's a great proof reader. Hi Mum!)

**Where food comes from** matters to me more than ever before. I don't want to eat food that costs the earth, even though I do, at times, indulge with the odd exotic fruit. I love growing our own vegetables and fruit, seeing directly the link between seed, plant, harvest, compost, and relishing the taste, texture, and nutritional value of something freshly picked or dug up, with earth still clinging to its roots. I feel so appreciative that I have fresh food to eat and see more clearly the overused phrase that we are what we eat. I'm more aware of the 'hungry gap' during the productive year which once upon a time would have caused hunger and suffering to our ancestors and still causes suffering to fellow human beings living in poverty.

**Learning how to eat** and learning how to feel safe and nourished are vital for a healthy human life; yet, it feels like many of our societies are disordered in our individual and collective approach to food and nourishment. This reminds me of what's known as the 'hungry ghost' realm from the image of the Tibetan Wheel of Life. Hungry ghosts are creatures with huge, distended, empty bellies. They are said to be constantly hungry because their thin necks don't allow food to pass to their stomach. Food turns to fire and ash in their mouths. They keep seeking food and nourishment.

**This desperate image** reminds me of the current predicaments of Western societies. We are constantly craving and never seem happy or contented with our lot. Capitalist habits of consumption compound this 'hungry ghost' pattern of addicted, compulsive behaviour. When the Buddha met a hungry ghost he is said to have offered it food and drink that was truly satisfying. This food and drink also symbolizes inner

nourishment, taking the place of the inner emptiness of the 'hungry ghost'. But I am also aware of a growing body of people who want to live consciously, to live as simply, wisely, and as lovingly as they can in these uncertain times and not consuming the earth.

### The Metta Sutta

If you know your own good  
and know where peace dwells  
then this is the task:

Lead a simple and a frugal life  
uncorrupted, capable and just;  
be mild, speak soft, eradicate conceit,  
keep appetites and senses calm.

Be discreet and unassuming;  
do not seek rewards.  
Do not have to be ashamed  
in the presence of the wise.

May everything that lives be well!  
Weak or strong, large or small,  
seen or unseen, here or elsewhere,  
present or to come, in heights or  
depths,  
may all be well.

Have that mind for all the world -  
get rid of lies and pride -  
a mother's mind for her baby,  
her love, but now unbounded

Secure this mind of love,  
no enemies, no obstructions  
wherever or however you may be!

It is sublime, this,  
it escapes birth and death,  
losing lust and delusion  
and living in the truth!

**Kamalmani** is an embodied-relational therapist, supervisor, facilitator and writer living and working in Bristol, UK. She has been a practicing Buddhist since her early 20s and loves seeing how age-old teachings and practices are relevant to contemporary life. She works at the interface of body psychotherapy, ecopsychology and

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well as detailed attention to thought restructuring seem to be some of the most helpful chapters in this section. Several appendices include extensive further resources and readings for those interested.

**Binge eating disorder** is a recent addition to the recognized eating disorder diagnostic categories and as a result few authors to date have directly addressed the mechanisms behind this specific issue. Fulvio makes an important contribution to the literature concerning recovery from binge eating disorder by

helping to provide resources that have previously not been available. This book's defining strength comes from its focus on healing the cognitive and emotional components underlying the maladaptive use of sustenance as a coping mechanism. If an individual is ready to address their problematic eating patterns and wishes to make some lasting and healthful changes, this manual appears to be a very good place to begin.

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ecodharma, drawing upon her experiences of being a development worker in sub-Saharan Africa, a lecturer in International Development at the University of Bristol, her current meditation practice and being a child lost and found in nature. Her first book, *Meditating with Character*, published in 2012, explores engaging with meditation

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