



DARK
(CHOCOLATE)
RITUALS

SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE
FROM THE
CHOCOLATE PRIESTESS

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I'M NOT ALL THAT SURPRISED TO DISCOVER THAT TAMMYJO ECKHART, THE SELF-PROCLAIMED **CHOCOLATE PRIESTESS**, HOLDS A PHD IN ANCIENT HISTORY, LIKES VAMPIRES, AND WRITES EROTIC FICTION.

It seems entirely appropriate that one of her books is titled *Sweet Memories of Pain and the Future of Pleasure*. After all, what could better sum up the complicated relationships that people – especially women – have with chocolate?

On her blog the Chocolate Cult, “a site dedicated to the exploration and ecstasy of chocolate”, Eckhart uses her considerable gifts to guide her acolytes to delicious enlightenment, with plenty of sensual indulgence along the way.

Her tale is like a born-again narrative that begins with spiritual desolation. “I consider myself to be a recovering chocoholic,” explains Eckhart, “and I use the term a little more seriously. My father is a recovering alcoholic. I grew up sort of using food as a substitution for other things, as I think many people do. Because of its chemical structure, chocolate produces a reaction in the brain. It gives us a feeling of euphoria and comfort. It makes you feel high, but a little warm too. That’s what we seek.

“In hindsight, though, I feel I was abusing chocolate,” she confesses. “I was buying whatever was on sale at the store. I might have been consuming 2000 calories of chocolate a week – 2000 useless, worthless calories that in the moment made me feel good, but certainly weren’t helping me address the actual problem. In reality, of course, I was lonely, stressed, whatever.”

Then she saw the light. But it wasn’t easy. “I made a decision to take better care of myself. I needed to get control of this chocolate problem.” Temptations were everywhere. “That was really very hard. If you try to deprive

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yourself of something, it becomes huge in your mind."

Thus, rather than avoiding the substance producing spiritual angst, she embraced it in a new way. "I joked initially about starting my own cult. But pretty quickly, after I started the blog, I really got into it."

She set aside a day of worship to observe the sacrament and ask the tough philosophical questions. "Saturday is my day to indulge with chocolate, with a purpose. My motto now is moderation and purposefulness. I eat mindful of how chocolate is made, why it's made, why I want it, how it makes me feel. The result is that during the week, I don't crave chocolate any more."

Despite humble beginnings in 2009, Eckhart now boasts about 24,000 unique site visitors, and to date has reviewed over 60 products, sent to her by companies eager to receive her blessing.

Her Saturday Sacrament rituals, during which she reviews chocolate products, are highly specific. She begins by purifying the body. "I get up and have nothing else to eat or drink except cranberry juice." She receives the wisdom offered by each chocolatier. Then

it's time for chocolate communion.

"I look at it. I take pictures. I smell it. Sometimes the smell of cocoa is really intense, or mild, or not there at all. Depending on the chocolate, you might get other scents in there.

"I eat the chocolate at least two different ways. I take a first bite, and just chew it. I'm thinking, What textures are here, what part of my tongue is registering the taste? Do I feel any sort of change in my brain, in my mouth... is there a tingle? Products with a high cocoa content do create a chemical rush, similar to caffeine or alcohol. Second bite, I let it melt. It tastes very different that way. The same flavours can also taste quite different, depending on how they make the chocolate or store it, or where it's grown. For instance, the soil is different in Central America than in Africa, and that affects it."

Her mindful meditations and regular devotions have paved the road to enlightenment. "I pay a lot more attention to the ingredients now. You can tell when manufacturers have added what's basically wax, or sugar. It's a huge difference. And you don't really notice if you've just grown up

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eating regular grocery store chocolate. This process has provided me with a much deeper understanding and appreciation of chocolate."

Then, a confession. "I think I'm kind of becoming a chocolate snob. If someone offered me a bite of something generic and cheap, I might take a bite to be polite. But I don't feel like going out and buying that stuff any more." To her, the path is clear. "I don't feel like investing my money and body."

Her journey and practice has also required her to clarify her genesis stories for the edification of acolytes. "Someone asked me if chocolate was a god. I said um, no, chocolate comes from a plant, but I guess you could say a plant is created by God, if you believe that. You'd be amazed at the number of people who don't know chocolate comes from plants. I don't know where they think it comes from."

Along with establishing her creation narratives, Eckhart offers other advice to potential new acolytes. Like a benevolent guru, she is graciously direct, sharing the types of homely yet illuminating truisms that have characterized the teachings of successful

religious faiths.

"Think about why you want to eat chocolate. That's the first step in being purposeful. Why are you drawn towards this? A lot of people say 'Just because', or 'It tastes good'. What about it tastes good? What do you mean? How does it make you feel? Think about why you're doing it; why you're eating it. That can be applied to anything: meat, bread, bottled water.

"Second, be moderate. I get this a bit from being an ancient historian. It's the mindset of classical Athens – the best person is a moderate person, who doesn't allow themselves to go to any extremes in any aspect of their lives. That's good for us in general. We live in a world of extremes: either we want a lot or we deprive ourselves of things. I'm not sure either is the healthiest. If you deprive yourself for too long, either you lose the desire for whatever that is – and it could be something that's good for you – or it could become increasingly important and you become obsessive. One day you're going to lose control and go to the other extreme.

"Third is a practical suggestion. Go slow. Savour it. Don't eat chocolate

with other things. Really give your mouth, nose, and senses a chance to experience it. You won't want as much. You'll get satisfied much more quickly.

Eckhart has a wry sense of humour about her newfound revelations and mission. It's all in good fun, she says, although she takes her product reviews very seriously. She also understands the gravity of the larger questions that such inquiries prompt. "You should eat chocolate with a purpose and think about it. How did I get here? How did this get here? Why? I keep this in mind especially when talking about Fair Trade, recycling, biodegradable packing, and so forth.

"If I can get a dozen people to hink about chocolate in a different way and maybe make some different choices, that'd be excellent. I'd feel like I accomplished something. I'm doing my best, writing honestly, and from the heart. Hopefully people will respond to that."

thechocolatecult.blogspot.com