

DCIA-CROP 2015 WORLD FOOD DAY FAST
NOTES ON FASTING AND SPIRITUALITY IN SELECTED TRADITIONS

Fasting can take many forms. It can mean abstinence from all food and drink, but it can also mean general restriction (low-calorie intake) or restriction from certain foods or food combinations (kosher diets, vegetarianism, veganism, etc.). That means that fasts can also be permanent or temporary, occasional or regular. The following is a brief description of different religious traditions' (arranged alphabetically) understanding of fasting—keeping in mind that most traditions are incredibly diverse, and these snapshots do not do their complexity justice. Here we simply lift out common themes with a particular eye to how each tradition's practices connect with issues of hunger and social justice.

Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í do not view fasting as an ascetic (or, self-denying) practice, which also means fasting is not understood as an act of penance, or remorse for one's conduct. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, an early leader of the Bahá'í Faith, describes fasting as "taking on the characteristics of the spirit, being carried away by the breathings of heaven and catching fire from the love of God." Fasting should help produce clarity of focus on God alone. For the Bahá'í, therefore, fasting is foremost an act of devotion, a means of communion with God, and a matter of individual spiritual growth.

That said, the Bahá'í Faith is rooted in a history of social justice initiatives, and fasting participates in that concern. "[Fasting] is a tangible way of expressing social concern; of connecting to another reality," writes Paul Fieldhouse of Bahá'í practices of fasting. It "allows one to experience the sensation of hunger and thereby empathize more closely with those for whom hunger is an involuntary condition, and recognize the injustice of this situation."

Buddhism

Fasting is not obligatory for Buddhists. As followers of the Middle Way, or the way of moderation, fasting (viewed by many as an extreme) does not play a central role in the religion. Still, many Buddhists do choose to fast, especially monks, who typically abstain from eating after the noon meal. In this way they purify themselves, clarify their thoughts, gain and demonstrate mastery over desire, and more. These daily fasts also function as a helpful tool toward self-awareness.

Part of cultivating self-awareness is cultivating an awareness of the ethical effects of one's own diet on others. Rev. Heng Sure of Berkeley Buddhist Monastery writes, "Eating less luxurious food creates an opportunity to serve the planet and all living beings. In this way the dining table becomes a place of practice."

Christianity

Fasting has taken on many meanings for Christians over time. It has often been an ascetic and/or penitential practice, serving as a physical embodiment of repentance for personal or communal sin or as a way of identifying with Christ's suffering. Fasting has also been a means of purification or preparation for encounter with God. The annual season of Lent traditionally has been for fasting, and for much of Christian history, Wednesdays and Fridays have been days of weekly fasting throughout the year. Augustine, a great saint of Christianity, wrote, "Fasting cleanses the soul, raises the mind, subjects one's flesh to the spirit, renders the heart contrite and humble, scatters the clouds of concupiscence, quenches the fire of lust, and kindles the true light of chastity. Enter again into yourself." Here also we see fasting as a means of spiritual discipline and self-awareness.

Fasting in Christianity has long been deeply connected to social justice. The Christian New Testament bids Christians to hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matthew 5:6), and fasting is a way to obey that commandment literally. Many use fasting as an aid to prayer, especially prayers petitioning God's intercession for justice. Fasting also helps wealthier Christians empathize with the involuntarily hungry. Earlier Christians took this empathy to its extreme. Jonathon Wilson-Hartgrove writes, "In the early church, if anyone in the fellowship was hungry, it was common practice in some places for the whole community to go without until they could supply their brother or sister's need."

Hinduism

Hinduism generally teaches that one should eat only enough for health, and rarely or never to indulgence. This practice of self-discipline—a kind of perpetual fast for the Hindu—emphasizes the soul's dominance over the body. Fasting functions for many Hindus as a mode of purification of one's mind, body and soul.

It can intensify one's prayers and meditation, and it can be undergone as an act of penance. Not all, but many Hindus also choose vegetarianism for all of these reasons, and/or as a practice of non-violence toward animals.

Hinduism's fasting practices are perhaps most popularly or visibly connected to social justice due to the witness of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi practiced fasting for all of the reasons above, but also to exert political influence for the sake of justice. In 1965 he writes, "The fact is that all spiritual fasts always influence those who come within the zone of their influence. That is why spiritual fasting is described as *tapas* [religious austerity]. And all *tapas* invariably exerts purifying influence on those in whose behalf it is undertaken." Gandhi both engaged in personal fasts and led communal fasts as forms of social protest to colonial rule and more.

Islam

Fasting is a key discipline for most Muslims, and it contains a wide range of meaning and purpose. The chief reason Muslims fast is that Allah has commanded it. The discipline is a practice in obedience to God. The most well-known and arguably the most important period of fasting for members of Islam occurs during the month of Ramadan. During this month adult Muslims fast from all sustenance from sunrise to sunset to commemorate the first revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad. Fasting in this context can function as an offering of praise, as a kind of sacrifice, a discipline for controlling one's desires, atonement, purification, and more. The observance of this fast constitutes one of the Five Pillars of Islam.

The fast is also intimately connected to justice. It is meant to produce a sense of solidarity between those who are fasting and those who are involuntarily hungry. Moreover, the Qur'an says, "O you who believe, fasting is prescribed to you as it was to those before you, that you may (learn) self-restraint" (2:183). Many Muslims point out that learning self-restraint enables one to reign in greed, blind ambition, anger, and other vices that lead to injustice.

Jainism

Followers of Jainism seek liberation from pride, greed, anger, and more, and believe that the way to achieve this liberation is through nonviolence and renunciation. Along these lines, a distinctive characteristic of Jains is their vegetarianism. If animals were at all harmed in the production of milk or eggs, Jains are also encouraged to observe vegan diets. They even regret that they must harm plants in order to live, and so strive to eat only as much as necessary to live. On top of these permanent fasts, followers of Jainism frequently engage in fasts abstaining from all food.

Like many of the religions already discussed, fasting in Jainism carries many meanings. Primarily, however, it is a path to self-control, and just as importantly, a necessary practice in the pursuit of nonviolence or non-injury toward other living things. Fasting in Jainism therefore not only entails a concern for the hungry and suffering. Such concern is intrinsic to fasting. "The essence of all knowledge consists in not committing violence," said Mahavira, the last Tirthankara (a person who has achieved liberation and guides others). "The doctrine of *ahimsa* (non-injury) is nothing but the observance of equality."

Judaism

One dominant understanding of fasting in Judaism is atonement, or the redress of sin—not that fasting achieves atonement on its own, but it is conducive to atonement. This explains why a 24-hour fast from food and drink is central to Yom Kippur, the annual Jewish Day of Atonement, on which Jews reflect on their sin of the past year and ask forgiveness. Fasting is also a practice of mourning within Judaism, and also, conversely, a practice of gratitude as Jews reflect on gifts that run deeper than material needs. Fasting as an expression of grief is in focus on the second annual major day of fasting, Tisha B'Av, commemorating the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and the Holocaust.

Fasting has also traditionally been a partner to prayer in petitioning God. The Hebrew Bible contains many stories of worshippers entering a fast in order to entreat God for justice. Moreover, according to Jewish scholar Michael Barre, prophetic traditions within Judaism emphasize that "unless accompanied by actions of love of neighbor fasting is an empty ritual... For the Israelites fasting was meant to be a 'sign' of *repentance*, of turning back to God. A distinctive mark of Israelite religion was that turning to God was inseparable from turning in love to one's neighbor." This perspective is expressed in the prophetic writings, as exemplified in Isaiah 58:6-7, "'Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?'"