
THE DISCIPLINE OF FASTING

“Fasting can bring breakthroughs in the spiritual realm that could never be had in any other way.” – Richard Foster

“The Central idea in fasting is the voluntary denial of a...normal function for the sake of intense spiritual activity.” – Unknown

“Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice... to let the oppressed go free...” – the Prophet Isaiah (58:6)

Fasting in the Old Testament:

"tsoum" refers to a voluntary privation of food, especially for a religious purpose. It may include an appeal to sorrow for sins (Isaiah 58:3-7, Ezra 9:1-15). The Mosaic Law referred to one day of fasting per year (Leviticus 16:29, 23,29). Moses fasted 40 days and nights (Exodus 34:28). Daniel and David fasted (Daniel 9:3, 10:2-3; II Samuel 1:12, 12:16). The Psalmists talked of fasting (Psalms 69:11, 109:24) and the Prophets were against a mere exterior fast (Isaiah 58:3-11, Joel 2:12-13).

Fasting in the New Testament:

The prophetess Anna worshiped with fasting (Luke 2:37). Jesus fasted 40 days and nights, was tempted (Matthew 4:2) and then called disciples to join his ministry (Matthew 4:18). He called for a new meaning of fasting (Matthew 6:16-18) including a new accent of joy (Matthew 9:14). Jesus left no fixed legislating details and linked prayer with fasting (Mark 9:29). Paul and the early community did the same (2 Corinthians 11:27, Acts 13:2-3).

Fasting in History:

Later, fasts were prescribed for Christians on Wednesdays and Fridays (before 70 A.D.). In the 4th Century the Lenten fast was common. Gandhi fasted for 21 days on only water and salt (1924). ***“What the eyes are for the outer world, fasts are for the inner.” – Mahatma Gandhi.***

Along with spiritual values, fasters report a quickening of mental clarity as well as improved power in the physical senses. ***“Fasting profoundly modifies and purifies the tissues.”***

Forms of Fasting:

- Abstinence from specific foods (meat, sugar, etc.)
- Liquids only (abstinence from all solid nourishment)
- Juice only (clear juices – fruit juice, vegetable broth, herbal tea, water)
- Water only
- Nothing (complete abstinence from all solids and liquids)
- Continuous period of time (days, weeks, Lent, etc.)
- Dawn to Dusk
- One meal a day
- One day a week
- etc.

For more specific information, see "A Return to Fasting" by G.A. Maloney

MEDITATIONS ON FASTING

Isaiah 58:6-9

This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke, setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke, sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless, clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own. Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your wound shall quickly be healed; your vindication shall go before you, and God shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call upon God who will answer; you shall cry for help and God will say, "Here I am!"

Gandhi

Every...religion of any importance appreciates the spiritual value of fasting... For one thing, identification with the starving poor is a meaningless term without the experience behind it. But I quite agree that even an eighty-day fast may fail to rid a person of pride, selfishness, ambition, and the like. Fasting is merely a prop. But as a prop to a tottering structure is of essential value, so is the prop of fasting of inestimable value for a struggling soul.

Dorothy Day *(after a 10-day fast in the early 60s during the second Vatican Council urging the bishops to issue a strong peace statement)*

As for me, I did not suffer at all from the hunger or headache or nausea which usually accompanies the first few days of a fast, but I had offered my fast in part for the victims of famine all over the world, and it seemed to me that I had very special pains. They were certainly of a kind I have never had before, and they seemed to me to pierce the very marrow of my bones when I lay down at night.

Cesar Chavez

Fasting has always been an important part of our farm worker movement. We learned from Gandhi and other spiritual leaders before him the value of fasting for such personal purposes as preparation for a significant life event, atonement, and self-purification... We also learned from Gandhi that the value of fasting could be extended beyond the personal to the social; that a person who fasted and suffered for a much-needed societal change broader than his or her purposes could elicit from others the desire to share the suffering and thereby participate in eradicating a specific social injustice.

Mobi Warren *(At 19, she fasted in solidarity with Nguyen Thi Yen, a student who was arrested and tortured during the Vietnam War.)*

My urgency increases. Nguyen Thi Yen, I will fast from all solid food until you are free and reunited with your mother, until you can climb the coconut trees and pluck papaya from sunny branches. If I cannot know the brokenness, the blood your body has lost, let me at least learn simplicity and directness to work for your life... I hope some if its spirit, those parts which emerge effortlessly, will reach you like the almost-sound of a bird's wings.

*Distributed by Pax Christi USA; 532 W. 8th St., Erie, PA;
Tel: 814-453-4955; Fax: 814-452-4784;
e-mail: info@paxchristiusa.org; www.nonviolence.org/pcusa*

GUIDE TO FASTING

We read in the Old Testament that fasts are proclaimed in times of calamity or profound injustice (Jeremiah 36:9; Joel 1:14). The object of the fast is to purify the soul and draw public attention to the calamity, to make the voice heard. The fast symbolizes that the people are carrying a massive load and that something needs to change. Fasting is a spiritual response to injustice that allows an inflowing of God's spirit to provide a clarity of vision and direction. Fasting is a recognition of our weakness and an admission of God's power – the power of miracle to change a situation of extreme injustice.

Fasting is defined as the ***voluntary abstinence from food or drink or both***. The abstention may be complete or partial, lengthy or of short duration. Whether you fast for one meal, one day, or an extended period of time, it is important to:

- consult your physician beforehand if you have a physical condition that could be affected by not eating.
- reduce your intake of food for one or two days prior to the fast. Avoid alcohol and caffeine.
- begin your fast with a positive attitude. Be aware of its roots in Biblical tradition. Stay focused on why you are fasting. Be open to the Spirit's leading.
- drink 2-3 quarts of liquid during the day, especially water and fruit juices. It is common to feel nauseous or light-headed during the first day or two of a fast.
- spend time in prayer and reflection. Reflect upon how Jesus defines his mission (Luke 4:16-21) and how Isaiah calls us to link our fasting to action for justice (Isaiah 58:1-12).
- break your fast with a light meal of fruit, vegetables, soup or bread.

EMBARKING ON AN EXTENDED FAST (more than a few days)

WHAT HAPPENS:

- **Expendable Energy:** The human organism is amazing in its ability to cope during a fast. Glucose, the simple sugar that meets most of the body's energy needs, is depleted within about 12 hours of initiating a fast. At this point the body begins breaking down muscle tissue for the conversion of amino acids into glucose. This process, along with the breakdown of fat, continues for about two days. Then the biochemical processes shift to protein-sparing reactions. The body slows the destruction of muscle to almost nothing and begins to use other sources of expendable energy such as fat stores and superfluous tissues.
- **Rest:** Digestion requires immense energy. (No wonder one often suffers fatigue after consuming an especially large meal!) During a fast, the body enjoys a much needed rest from the overwhelming task of digestion.
- **Detoxification:** While fasting, the body rids itself of accumulated toxins by mobilizing these toxins from their storage sites (fat stores and other tissues). These waste products are then excreted from the breath, the tongue, the urine, and the skin.

WHAT YOU MIGHT FEEL:

Headaches, nausea and fatigue are common, especially within the first couple of days. You may not have as much energy as usual and could even feel a little light-headed. Adjust to this by rising slowly and walking slowly with someone at your side. If taking juices, you may find that your energy level remains the same or even increases. If taking only water, you might start to slow down after the second week and experience steadily decreasing bodily strength from there on. A thickening of the tongue, bad breath, skin eruptions and dark urine are common as the body begins to detoxify. You may also feel more vulnerable emotionally while fasting (i.e. deepened feelings of anguish over the suffering of innocent victims...)

WHAT TO DO:

- Two or three days prior to beginning the fast, gradually reduce your food intake. Eat mostly fruits and vegetables and minimize fats, meats, and desserts.
- Since the body will not eliminate solid wastes while you are fasting, it's a good idea to use an enema the first day to help clean out the colon.
- During the fast, it is essential to drink 2-3 quarts of water a day to prevent dehydration and to flush toxins from the bloodstream. You may also consider taking a potassium supplement to help maintain your electrolyte balance.
- "Juice Fasting" consists of ingesting fresh fruit and vegetable juices to the exclusion of any solid foods. Some people favor juice fasting because toxins are released more slowly into the bloodstream than with a plain water fast. Also the high mineral and vitamin content of the juices helps neutralize and eliminate these poisons more efficiently.
- The best way to break a fast is to eat one half of a serving of fruit, then gradually increase the amounts the first day. This slow introduction of food is crucial after the complete shut down of the digestive system in order to allow for the gradual return of digestive secretions. Too much too fast is very rough on the circulatory and digestive systems. Begin introducing small amounts of pureed food, then add boiled vegetables, apple sauce, soups, etc. Animal proteins, fats, and sweets should be added no sooner than the third day of breaking a fast. Some people advise taking as many days returning to full meals as you spent abstaining from food.

Sources

"Fasting for Health, Fasting to Fight Disease" by Nicholas R. LeRoy, D.C. Dipl. Ac. in ***An Alternative Opinion***, Vol. 1, #2; published by Millennium-III-Medicine; 30 S. Michigan Ave., #304; Chicago, IL 60603; February, 1997.

"The Fasting Process" by Suza Norton in ***The Holistic Health Handbook*** compiled by the Berkeley Holistic Health Center, published by the Stephen Greene Press; Fessenden Rd.; Brattleboro, VT 05301; 1984.