

Spiritual Fasting

by Dr. Robert Sniadach

Traditional wisdom teachings strongly advocate fasting as the supreme way to heal illness, purify oneself and grow spiritually. Fasting for religious and spiritual reasons has been a part of human custom since pre-history. It is mentioned in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testament, the Qur'an, the Mahabharata, and the Upanishads, among others.

Spiritual fasting is undertaken specifically for spiritual reasons. It is an excellent spiritual discipline designed to steer our minds away from food, drink (other than pure water), exercise, work, relationships and other distractions. We can focus our energies toward our subtle inner being.

We live in a culture that promotes looking for answers outside of ourselves. Philosopher Alan Watts captured this eloquently in the title of his classic 1966 work, *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*. This constant cultural reinforcement to look for answers and personal validation outside of ourselves breeds conformity and passivity. A peaceful fast provides a complete break from our usual outward focus and dependence on external stimulation; it gives us the opportunity to reconnect to our body and mind, and feel the supportive embrace of the natural environment.

Fasting can help you discover the root cause of physical and emotional symptoms of disease. It can help illuminate the underlying spiritual conflicts, so you can truly heal.

Fasting enhances self-awareness and self-control; fasting calls for self-restraint and patience. The meditative state of fasting encourages self-observation of tendencies toward anger, loneliness, gluttony, and pride. Likewise, the meditative, prayerful state of fasting endows the soul with moral and spiritual strength to promote beauty, harmony, peace and compassion.

Fasting assists in making deep, fundamental changes—this is the only true answer for lasting health. This is a challenging path, as old patterns and habits are deeply etched into us. It takes willingness and courage to uncover blocks to your health and to break through to higher ways of living and being. You know at a deep level that this is a necessary and vital part of your healing process. You seek the rewards of restored health, inner peace and empowerment. You want increased vitality and aliveness, new clarity about your purpose and goals in life, more meaningful relationships, and the ability to handle everyday problems with more ease and grace.

How Fasting Helps

Fasting quickens and intensifies the healing process. During a fast, as you find yourself enveloped in a serene, meditative state, you see yourself and your life with a detached objectivity. You gain clarity about how your thoughts and beliefs may be contributing to disease. You see what lifestyle practices need to change to achieve lasting health improvement. A renewed sense of purpose—and how to achieve it—becomes clearer and stronger. Fasting helps you to have a far greater perspective on your life, and from that vantage point, you can more closely examine how you are living, where you

are going, and why.

Each of us has a unique history of experiences, relationships, and perceptions, and we all have our own personal barriers to health and freedom. A fast helps us "get out of our own way." Great leaps forward are made during a fast as the protective layer of ego thins, allowing you to feel and release old emotions and gain deeper insight into yourself.

The healing process requires a thorough housecleaning of old beliefs and a willing surrender of old patterns. There are no "quick fixes." Many in this process describe a feeling of going into "the unknown," a huge break from their old, established ways of being. Strong faith in a Higher Power is the key that makes these changes possible.

This is a Spiritual Process

Fasting is practiced in many different ways, across many different belief systems, and is an integral feature of humanity's common spiritual heritage.

Jesus, Moses, the Buddha and many other sages of the East abstained from food at various times in the course of their pursuit of spiritual revelation. Consider Mahatma Gandhi's use of abstention—whether in regard to food, sex or speech—as a tested method to sublimate desires and strengthen the soul. For Gandhi, fasting was a spiritual act, going deeper into one's inner being, and it was synonymous with prayer. Fasting is not just physical self-restraint; it is fortified by an abiding faith in God. According to Gandhi, who was a staunch Hindu, "Truth is God" and "Religion is practice, not beliefs."

If you seek closer union with God, fasting will speed your journey. Fasting is best accompanied by prayer, meditation and much quiet contemplation. As you fast, seek within you the root cause of your own aberrant and unhealthful desires.

"The sufferings which overtake beings are the fruit of their desires."
Gautama Buddha, ~563-483 B.C.

During a fast, your body and mind progressively rest, relax and unwind from daily stresses and built-up tensions. Your deeper spiritual dimension comes to the forefront of awareness. As the fast continues, a profound sense of peacefulness and serenity wells up, feeling like a constant meditation is taking place within you. You naturally feel very connected to your core being...the part of you connected directly to the Divine. The sense of surrender that happens during a fast can profoundly heighten your personal spiritual connection.

"Fasting as a religious act increases our sensitivity to that mystery always and everywhere present to us. . . .It is an invitation to awareness, a call to compassion for the needy, a cry of distress, and a song of joy. It is a discipline of self-restraint, a ritual of purification, and a sanctuary for offerings of atonement. It is a wellspring for the spiritually dry, a compass for the spiritually lost, and inner nourishment for the spiritually hungry."
Father Thomas Ryan, Catholic priest

Fasting deeply rests and rejuvenates the overworked body and calms the monkey mind. It suspends our daily routine, allowing a far more detached point of view. Relaxed awareness prevails. Inner clarity improves. Your perspective expands and priorities realign. Fasting is simple, but not easy. Yet the rewards of greater Divine Union within, and continued healthful, peaceful living in daily life, are priceless.