

## **On Fasting: A Steadfast Commitment for Transformation and Connection**

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*Whenever there is distress which one cannot remove, one must fast and pray.*  
-Gandhi

Today, trends like intermittent fasting for better health have become all the rave. People swear by fasting's ability to rid the body of toxins and unwanted pounds. Health experts and social scientists have also adopted the terminology of fasting to abstain from the overuse of technology and social media. However, in many religions fasting has been an integral part of spiritual practice.

Traditionally, religions subscribe to fasting for various purposes, including penance, prayer, purification, and self-discipline. The practice of fasting generally implies abstaining from food or consumption of some specific foods on certain times or days. The philosophy behind such abstaining is to resist the temptations to consume food, the most primal need of life. This engenders discipline and creates space in mind to pray, and to reflect on our actions and the deeper truths of life. In this case, the focus is on purifying mental toxins and curbing desires.

The English word "fasting" etymologically relates to "steadfastness" and "firmly fixed." Thus, fasting requires commitment; a strong will to control desires. In India's traditions, the Sanskrit term *vrata*—literally meaning "vow" or "commitment"—is used for fasting. The vows, as during a marriage ceremony, binds humans to mutual commitment. A vow is voluntary but is often considered divinely sanctioned. In Jainism and Hinduism, *vrata* includes abstaining from food (and certain kinds of food) on certain days, as well as staying away from lying, stealing, sensual indulgence, and intoxicating substances in daily life. According to the Buddhist monastic rules, monks and nuns abstain from food after their mid-day meal. In Christianity, fasts are defined in terms of mortification of the flesh, so the spirit can come closer to God. In Islam, during the month-long Ramadan fast, Muslims abstain from food, drink, and sexual activity from dawn to dusk, as prescribed in the Quran.

Fasting has also been used as a tool to protest injustices and bring social change. For example, Mahatma Gandhi, Dorothy Day, and Cesar Chavez used fasting to remonstrate various inequities and oppressive laws. Even though some may term fasting as a "hunger strike," Gandhi and Chavez defined their fasting in terms of religious penance and purification. Gandhi once said, "a genuine fast cleanses the body and mind." Through his penance in forms of fasting, he sought to awaken the minds of his opponent so they could see their wrong doing. Cesar Chavez used "spiritual fasting" to galvanize the farmworkers for using nonviolent methods to secure dignity and justice.

Giving up food for other forms of fasting has also been taken up in the spirit of solidarity with the suffering. It helps to create a mental space to reflect on the atrocities inflicted by our societal systems. Every year in several countries a fast is observed between August 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> to show solidarity with those who lost their lives and suffered injuries because of the atomic bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Such fasts are imbued with all the elements of spiritual fasting: prayer, penance, and purification. They are meant to remind us to purify ourselves from violent tendencies, hold prayer for those who suffered, and to cultivate a space to reckon with the acts of those who launched those bombs.

Whether fasting is used for physical, activist, or spiritual benefits, it requires human willpower for self-discipline. Giving up *something* in fasting leads the way to receive the gifts of health, mental peace, spiritual connection, and human solidarity.