

Introduction

Every year, millions of followers of the Bahá'í Faith from 15-70 years of age embark on a 19-day spiritual journey called fasting. Bahá'u'lláh described this as the “season of restraint.”¹ It is a period of complete abstention from food and drink from sunrise to sunset during the period March 2 – March 20.

The 19-Day Fast is preceded by what Bahá'ís call “intercalary days” from February 26 – March 1. These intercalary days have also been designated as Ayyám-i-Há or “Days of Joy.” In addition to being a time of preparation for the fast, Bahá'u'lláh describes this time as the “days of giving that precede the season of restraint.”²

Bahá'u'lláh states:

*“It behoveth the people of Bahá, throughout these days, to provide good cheer for themselves, their kindred and, beyond them, the poor and needy, and with joy and exultation to hail and glorify their Lord, to sing His praise and magnify His name...”*³

The Fast is followed by a celebration called Naw-Ruz meaning “New Day” held on the spring equinox, March 21, inaugurating the first day of spring and the Bahá'í new year. Bahá'u'lláh designates Naw-Ruz as “a feast.”⁴

According to Shoghi Effendi:

“March 21, as the Master once explained, is the time of year when the climate is most moderate the world over. It is suited, therefore, to the New Year, which in our Faith comes after the month of fasting. The Fast

itself Bahá'u'lláh made easy by choosing the time when the days and nights everywhere are most equal.”⁵

The joy and celebration of giving and feasting surrounding the Fast frames the unique place those 19 days have in pattern of Bahá'í life. Beyond the mere abstention from food and drink, Bahá'u'lláh describes the central role fasting plays in spiritual life in the following passages:

“Fasting and Obligatory Prayer are as two wings to man’s life. Blessed be the one who soareth with their aid in the heaven of the love of God, the Lord of all worlds.”⁶

“Obligatory Prayer and fasting are among the most great ordinances of this holy Dispensation.”⁷

“In the realm of worship, fasting and Obligatory Prayer constitute the two mightiest pillars of God’s holy Law.”⁸

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s use of the word “pillar” signifies the great importance fasting plays in the Faith. The word “pillar” is often used to describe anything that is both fundamental and integral to the support of a larger structure. An absence of a pillar will result in the destabilization and possible collapse of that structure in times of stress. Spiritual pillars provide us with stability. They also support and facilitate a framework for contentment and continued spiritual growth in our life during times of both hardship and ease.

Reflections

- 1) What are examples of things that you would consider pillars in your life? Why do you consider them pillars?
- 2) Why do you think fasting is considered one of the pillars of the religion of God?

The Meaning of Fasting

According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

“Fasting is a symbol. Fasting signifies abstinence from lust. Physical fasting is a symbol of that abstinence, and is a reminder; that is, just as a person abstains from physical appetites, he is to abstain from self-appetites and self-desires. But mere abstention from food has no effect on the spirit. It is only a symbol, a reminder. Otherwise it is of no importance.”⁹

Successfully abstaining from food and drink from sunrise to sunset is only one step towards achieving the intended purpose and benefits of fasting, as it is not simply by physical actions that one successfully observes the Fast.

Fasting, in the Bahá'í sense, is essentially a spiritual practice. It is a time of reflection and meditation, allowing us to break from some of our daily routines as well as some of the material comforts which cater to our physical and psychological desires.

“Material fasting is a token of our spiritual detachment. The physical fast is simply restraint from eating physical food: physical detachment. The greater detachment is the spiritual fast: detachment from all desires of the self. This latter is our goal and the harder to attain. Still, we have the material fast to remind us and help us on our way towards real detachment. The Guardian assures us that prayer and fasting will help us in this struggle. He said they “act as stimulants to the soul, strengthen, revive and purify it, and thus ensure its steady development”. The fasting time, he said, is “essentially

*a period of meditation and prayer, of spiritual recuperation". He did not say it was a time of hunger, so the incidental hunger is of no consequence. It is not important. The significance and purpose of the fast is "fundamentally spiritual in character"*¹⁰

Living in a fast-paced world that encourages instant gratification and mindless obsessions, we often confuse what we need with what we want. These are fundamental distinctions to reflect and meditate on as we proceed through our spiritual journey during the Fast.

Thus, during the Fast, two important goals are:

- 1) To reflect, meditate on and practice that which sustains spiritual well-being (needs).
- 2) Detach ourselves by subduing those cravings or habits, be they physical or mental, that don't contribute or are harmful to our spiritual well-being (wants).

Detachment causes us to be less self-centered and more mindful of our spiritual inclinations and purpose. Achieving greater detachment is a spiritual journey that we undertake throughout our life. It allows us to achieve a state of spiritual and mental peace as well as an inner balance through a greater connection, trust, and reliance on God.

*"The station of absolute self-surrender transcendeth and will ever remain exalted above, every other station."*¹¹

"Make me ready, in all circumstances, O my Lord, to serve Thee and to set myself towards the adored sanctuary of Thy Revelation and of Thy Beauty. If it be Thy pleasure, make me to grow as a tender herb in the meadows of Thy grace, that the gentle winds of Thy will may stir me up and bend me into conformity with Thy pleasure, in such wise that my movement and my stillness may be wholly directed by Thee... I implore Thee, O my

*Lord, by Thy name the splendors of which have encompassed the earth and the heavens, to enable me so to surrender my will to what Thou hast decreed in Thy Tablets, that I may cease to discover within me any desire except what Thou didst desire through the power of Thy sovereignty, and any will save what Thou didst destine for me by Thy will."*¹²

It is important to keep in mind, however, that detachment does not imply indifference, suffering, selling our possessions, or disregarding our responsibilities in life. Our level of detachment is not measured by how rich or poor we are. Rather, it has to do with how the various aspects of our life and the world around us, be they big or small, affect our ability to cultivate spiritual virtues through our relationship with God and our efforts to know and worship Him.

'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

*Detachment does not consist in setting fire to one's house, or becoming bankrupt or throwing one's fortune out of the window, or even giving away all of one's possessions. Detachment consists in refraining from letting our possessions possess us. A prosperous merchant who is not absorbed in his business knows severance. A banker whose occupation does not prevent him from serving humanity is severed. A poor man can be attached to a small thing.*¹³

Bahá'u'lláh states:

*"Know ye that by 'the world' is meant your unawareness of Him Who is your Maker, and your absorption in aught else but Him....Whatsoever deterreth you, in this Day, from loving God is nothing but the world."*¹⁴

Detachment should, in fact, enhance the quality of our relationship with the world around us. In the Hidden Words, Bahá'u'lláh tells us:

“O Quintessence of Passion! Put away all covetousness and seek contentment; for the covetous hath even been deprived, and the contented hath ever been loved and praised”¹⁵

Reflections

- 1) What is the meaning of detachment?
- 2) Think about ways detachment can enhance the quality of your relationship with God.
- 3) Think about ways detachment can enhance the quality of your personal relationships.
- 4) Think about ways detachment can enhance the quality of your relationship with things around you.

The Purpose of Fasting

Fasting, in one form or another, has become a common practice in many of the world’s cultural and religious traditions. It has often been practiced for the purpose of gaining greater spiritual susceptibilities, insights, and spiritual renewal. According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

“...when His Holiness Moses went to Mount Tur (Sinai) and there engaged in instituting the Law of God, he fasted forty days. For the purpose of awakening and admonishing the people of Israel, fasting was enjoined upon them.

Likewise His Holiness Christ in the beginning of instituting the Spiritual Law, the systematizing of the Teachings and the arrangement of counsels, for forty days abstained from eating and drinking. In the beginning the disciples and Christians fasted. Later the assemblages of the chief Christians changed fasting into Lenten observances.

Likewise the Koran having descended in the month Ramadan, fasting during that month became a duty. In like manner His Holiness the Supreme (the BAB), in the beginning of the Manifestation, through the excessive effect of descending Verses, passed days in which his nourishment was reduced to tea only.

Likewise, the Blessed Beauty (BAHÁ’U’LLÁH), when busy with instituting the Divine Teachings and during the days when the Verses (the Word of God) descended continuously, through the great effect of the Verses and the throbbing of the heart, took no food except the least amount.”¹⁶

Fasting was also a common practice among the Dawn Breakers of our Faith. Mulla Husayn prayed and practiced fasting for 40 days in preparation for his search for the Bab.¹⁷ Tahirih's last request was that she be left alone to fast and pray until she was to be delivered into the hands of her guards and executioner.¹⁸

When practiced in the proper spirit, fasting is a powerful and effective means to advance your spiritual development. The following passages from the Bahá'í Writings describe some of the effects of fasting:

*“There are various stages and stations for the Fast and innumerable effects and benefits are concealed therein. Well is it with those who have attained unto them.”*¹⁹

*“Verily, I say fasting is the supreme remedy and the most great healing for the disease of self and passion.”*²⁰

*“Well is it with you, as you have followed the Law of God and arisen to observe the Fast during these blessed days, for this physical fast is a symbol of the spiritual fast. This Fast leadeth to the cleansing of the soul from all selfish desires, the acquisition of spiritual attributes, attraction to the breezes of the All-Merciful, and enkindlement with the fire of divine love.”*²¹

*“Fasting is the cause of awakening man. The heart becomes tender and the spirituality of man increases. This is produced by the fact that man's thoughts will be confined to the commemoration of God, and through this awakening and stimulation surely ideal advancements follow.”*²²

*“Fasting is the cause of the elevation of one's spiritual station.”*²³

*“...Obligatory Prayer and Fasting produce awareness and awakening in man, and are conducive to his protection and preservation from tests.”*²⁴

Reflections

- 1) Decide if the following statements are in accordance with the spirit of the Fast:
 - A) Since I don't usually eat breakfast anyway, I won't get up before sunrise to say dawn prayers during the Fast. Instead, I will sleep a few extra hours.”
 - B) “I love the Fast because it is a great time for me to lose weight.”
 - C) “I will use my lunch hour during the Fast as an opportunity to say some prayers and meditate on some Bahá'í Writings.”
 - D) “During the Fast, I will take the opportunity to pray and meditate on some ongoing spiritual challenges I have been facing in my life.”
- 2) How does fasting produce awareness and awakening in man?
- 3) How is fasting conducive to protection and preservation from tests?

Fasting and Moderation

It is important to keep in mind that Bahá'í fasting is to be distinguished from some of the extreme fasting practices around the world. The intention of a Bahá'í Fast is not to take extreme measures to make a political statement, to promote the Bahá'í Faith, or even to improve our physical health. Rather, the practice and principles of the Bahá'í Fast are based on moderation.

The Bahá'í teachings stress moderation in all aspects of life to maintain our physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. Bahá'u'lláh wrote:

*“In all matters moderation is desirable. If a thing is carried to excess, it will prove a source of evil.”*²⁵

*“Whatsoever passeth beyond the limits of moderation will cease to exert a beneficial influence.”*²⁶

While Bahá'ís call it the “19-day Fast”, it is only from sunrise to sunset each day for those 19 days. If practiced in the proper spirit and with proper diet, it is long enough for us to derive joy and spiritual rejuvenation without it becoming overly burdensome. The Writings teach us:

*“Restrain yourselves from sunrise to sunset. Thus doth the Beloved of mankind instruct you as bidden by God, the All-Powerful, the Unconstrained. It is not for anyone to exceed the limits laid down by God and His law, nor should anyone follow his own idle imaginings.”*²⁷

“The golden rule as to food is, do not take too much or too little. Moderation is necessary. There is a sect in India who practice extreme abstinence, and gradually

*reduce their food until they exist on almost nothing. But their intelligence suffers. A man is not fit to do service for God with brain or body if he is weakened by lack of food. He cannot see clearly.”*²⁸

In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh has written laws surrounding the Fast which demonstrate, again, the principle of moderation as well as His love for us by granting exemptions from fasting in certain instances. These include:

- *Fasting is binding on men and women attaining the age of maturity, which is fixed at 15.*
- *Exemption from fasting is granted to:*
 - *Travelers*
 - ◆ *Provided the journey exceeds 9 hours*
 - ◆ *Those traveling on foot, provided the journey exceeds 2 hours*
 - ◆ *Those who break their journey for less than 19 days*
 - ◆ *Those who break their journey during the Fast at a place where they are to stay 19 days are exempt from fasting for only the first 3 days from their arrival.*
 - ◆ *Those who reach home during the Fast must commence the Fast on the day of their arrival.*
 - *Those who are ill*
 - *Those who over 70*
 - *Women with child*
 - *Women who are nursing*
 - *Women in their courses, provided they perform their ablutions and repeat a specifically revealed verse (“Glorified be God, the Lord of Splendor and Beauty”) 95 times a day*
 - *Those who are engaged in heavy labour, who are advised to show respect for the law by using discretion and restraint when availing themselves of the exemption.*²⁹

Recognizing that we are all human and subject to fallibility and frailty, Shoghi Effendi wrote:

*“If one eats unconsciously during the fasting hours, this is not breaking the Fast as it is an accident. The age limit is seventy years, but if one desires to Fast after the age limit is passed, and is strong enough to, one is free to do so. If during the Fast period a person falls ill and is unable to fast, but recovers before the Fast period is over, he can start to fast again and continue until the end.”*³⁰

Reflections

- 1) Think of some examples of how something that is considered beneficial can cease to exert a beneficial influence when carried beyond the bounds of moderation.
- 2) Reflect on how some of the laws of Bahá'u'lláh pertaining to the Fast demonstrate moderation.

Meditation, Prayer and Fasting

The practices of reflection and meditation go hand in hand and are integral to the process of gaining greater spiritual awareness during the Fast. Immersion in worldly affairs can distract us from our spiritual purpose, making it more difficult for us to be aware of our spiritual condition. Reflection and meditation provides us with an opportunity to look within ourselves with a spiritual eye and think quietly, calmly, and truthfully about our actions (be they positive or negative) and current state, judging them according to the standards of the Bahá'í teachings. This introspective state is central to the process of spiritual growth and change. The Writings teach us:

*“O SON OF BEING! Bring thyself to account each day ere thou art summoned to a reckoning; for death, unheralded, shall come upon thee and thou shalt be called to give account for thy deeds.”*³¹

*“Truthfulness is the foundation of all the virtues of the world of humanity. Without truthfulness, progress and success in all the worlds of God are impossible for a soul. When this holy attribute is established in man, all the divine qualities will also become realized.”*³²

Through reflection and meditation, we turn our mind and heart away from ourselves and towards Bahá'u'lláh, allowing our spirit to commune and draw nearer to Him.

“Through the faculty of meditation man attains to eternal life; through it he receives the breath of the Holy Spirit – the bestowal of the Spirit is given in reflection and meditation...This faculty of meditation frees man from

*the animal nature, discerns the reality of things, puts man in touch with God.”*³³

*“Through meditation the doors of deeper knowledge and inspiration may be opened. Naturally, if one meditates as a Bahá’í he is connected with the Source...”*³⁴

It is important to keep in mind that there are no rules or form of “Bahá’í meditation.” Meditation does, however, require that we remain silent. According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

*“Bahá’u’lláh says there is a sign (from God) in every phenomenon: the sign of the intellect is contemplation and the sign of contemplation is silence, because it is impossible for a man to do two things at one time—he cannot both speak and meditate.”*³⁵

As long as our actions are in harmony with the teachings, we are free to meditate in a way that we are comfortable with. There is no a particular way or a specific time or place to meditate. It can be done at any time of the day when our mind is free. This could happen during quiet times in the morning or evening. Shoghi Effendi states:

*“As to meditation: This also is a field in which the individual is free. There are no set forms of meditation prescribed in the teachings, no plan as such, for inner development. The friends are urged—nay enjoined—to pray, and they also should meditate, but the manner of doing the latter is left entirely to the individual.”*³⁶

*“Meditation is very important, and the Guardian sees no reason why the friends should not be taught to meditate, but they should guard against superstitious or foolish ideas creeping into it.”*³⁷

The Sacred Writings and prayers play a central role in reflection and meditation, as they are where our knowledge of

God and our relationship with Him originates. Bahá’u’lláh had revealed several prayers specifically for the Fast that help us focus and give us both insight and strength during our 19 day spiritual journey. At the end of this section, three of these special prayers are given. One can find many more prayers for fasting in the Bahá’í Writings. These prayers serve as excellent guides and reminders of a proper attitude during fasting. Although these are prayers revealed specifically for the Fast, one can recite, reflect, and meditate on any of the Bahá’í prayers and Writings during the Fast.

The ardour with which we offer our prayer is more important than the amount of prayers. Bahá’u’lláh states:

*“The most acceptable prayer is the one offered with the utmost spirituality and radiance; its prolongation hath not been and is not beloved by God. The more detached and the purer the prayer, the more acceptable is it in the presence of God.”*³⁸

It would be helpful to review the section entitled “Service, Reflection, Meditation and Prayer” in the Ruhi books, as a reminder of the importance of daily prayer as well as the proper attitudes during prayer.

“This is, O my God, the first of the days on which Thou hast bidden Thy loved ones to observe the Fast. I ask of Thee by Thy Self and by him who hath fasted out of love for Thee and for Thy good-pleasure — and not out of self and desire, nor out of fear of Thy wrath — and by Thy most excellent names and august attributes, to purify Thy servants from the love of aught except Thee and to draw them nigh unto the Dawning-Place of the lights of Thy countenance and the Seat of the throne of Thy oneness. Illumine their hearts, O my God, with the light of Thy knowledge and brighten their faces with the rays of the Daystar that shineth from the horizon of Thy Will. Potent art Thou to do

what pleaseth Thee. No God is there but Thee, the All-Glorious, Whose help is implored by all men.

Assist them, O my God, to render Thee victorious and to exalt Thy Word. Suffer them, then, to become as hands of Thy Cause amongst Thy servants, and make them to be revealers of Thy religion and Thy signs amongst mankind, in such wise that the whole world may be filled with Thy remembrance and praise and with Thy proofs and evidences. Thou art, verily, the All-Bounteous, the Most Exalted, the Powerful, the Mighty, and the Merciful.”³⁹

“Praise be unto Thee, O Lord my God! We have observed the Fast in conformity with Thy bidding and break it now through Thy love and Thy good-pleasure. Deign to accept, O my God, the deeds that we have performed in Thy path wholly for the sake of Thy beauty with our faces set towards Thy Cause, free from aught else but Thee. Bestow, then, Thy forgiveness upon us, upon our forefathers, and upon all such as have believed in Thee and in Thy mighty signs in this most great, this most glorious Revelation. Potent art Thou to do what Thou chooseth. Thou art, verily, the Most Exalted, the Almighty, the Unconstrained.”⁴⁰

O Divine Providence! As I am abstaining from bodily desires and not occupied with eating and drinking, even so purify and sanctify my heart from the love of anyone save Thyself and shield and protect my soul from the corrupt desires and satanic qualities so that my spirit may commune with the breaths of holiness and fast from the mention of all else besides Thee.⁴¹

Reflections

- 1) How is truthfulness important in daily reflection and meditation?
- 2) Some examples of topics to reflect, meditate, and pray about can include:
 - Questions regarding God’s will in your life
 - The application of a specific passage in the Writings to your life
 - How you will work through a particular test or difficulty you are facing
 Think about some other areas you could reflect, meditate, and pray about during the Fast.
- 3) How can some parts of the above prayers help you focus and give you insight during the Fast?

Concerns Regarding Fasting

Food has traditionally played an important role in most personal, cultural, and religious practices. Thus, beliefs as well as the basis of beliefs surrounding food are often very complex and varied. Most of us are accustomed to living in cultures where it is acceptable, or even desirable, to eat available food whenever we want.

Cultural or social norms may interpret the idea of dietary deprivation as being harmful to one's health. One concern may center on the idea that the human body requires three meals each day so fasting from sunrise to sunset weakens the body by depriving it of essential nutrition. This worry about deprivation can be so overriding to some that it can paralyze their ability to fast. The requirement of these meals has no scientific basis in an otherwise healthy individual.

More importantly, however, we should take comfort in knowing that the Bahá'í teachings have a deep respect for the body and would not institute laws that hurt it.

*“Since the physical frame is the throne whereon the inner temple is established, God hath ordained that the body be preserved to the extent possible, so that nothing that causeth repugnance may be experienced.”*⁴²

*“Keeping the Fast is enjoined upon all Bahá'ís, regardless of nationality; it has a very salutary effect both physically and spiritually, and the friends should realize Bahá'u'lláh never would have instituted it if it were detrimental to the health.”*⁴³

*“Bahá'u'lláh would not have given us these things if they would not greatly benefit us, and, like children who are sensible enough to realize their father is wise and does what is good for them, we must obey these ordinances even though at first we may not see any need for them. As we obey them we will gradually come to see in ourselves the benefits they confer.”*⁴⁴

Despite these assurances, it may be difficult for some, due to personal or cultural experiences, to truly understand why fasting from sunrise to sunset is not, in fact, harmful to the body. One useful way to approach this is by understanding what happens to the body during eating and fasting.

The Basics of Energy Metabolism

For the purposes of understanding energy metabolism let us keep in mind that the body's universal energy source is in the form of a sugar called glucose. This is obtained from the foods we eat. Our body undergoes two general physiological phases after we consume a meal: The absorptive phase and post-absorptive phase.

Absorptive Phase

The absorption phase is considered the time it takes the last meal to be absorbed from our stomach and small intestine. Depending on what was eaten, it normally lasts between 2-6 hours and is a period when energy, in the form of a sugar called glucose, is absorbed from the digestive tract directly into the blood. This glucose is delivered to various parts of our body and is absorbed by the cells, with the help of insulin, for their immediate energy needs. Excess glucose that is not used for the cells' immediate energy needs is stored in various tissues in the body in the form of glycogen and will be readily available for future use, if needed. If the body's glycogen storage capacity is reached, excess glucose is converted to fat; the body's largest fuel store.

The Post-Absorptive Phase

The post-absorptive phase begins once the stomach is empty and is when the true physiological fasting state begins for the body. Blood glucose levels begin to fall, as there is not more glucose to be absorbed by the stomach. Depending on the kinds of foods that were eaten, this can begin anywhere between 2-6 hours after the last meal.

Our tissues, however, require a constant supply of glucose to function properly. To ensure an uninterrupted energy supply, glycogen and some fat stores will be converted into glucose. This will be delivered into the blood circulation for tissues to use. In a healthy individual, at no point during this process is the body actually “starving.” A true starving state begins when all the glycogen supplies have been depleted. In a well nourished person, this usually occurs 24-48 hours after the last meal.^{45,46}

Another way to put this all into perspective is to think about what happens to our bodies every evening. All of us need to rest our bodies and minds by sleeping. Assuming you sleep an average of 8 hours per night and you don’t get up every few hours to eat and drink, you are in the post-absorptive state of fasting each morning. After waking, it is customary for most to have the first meal of the day called “breakfast” which literally concludes the period of fasting the previous evening. Given this daily pattern, it is clear that the body is accustomed to extended periods of fasting with few, if any, side-effects.

Reflection

- 1) Fasting is a new concept and practice for many individuals. Reflect on the concerns, if any, you have about fasting. What can you do to overcome those concerns?

The Desire to Eat

It is believed that food intake is generally controlled by three sensations: Hunger, fullness, and appetite.⁴⁷ “Hunger” is a concept whose definition can vary according to the individual, culture, or context and is a term often used interchangeably with appetite. For the purposes of this booklet, hunger will be defined as a physiologically based physical feeling due to the absence of food intake. In addition to experiencing a strong desire to eat, the physical symptoms of hunger can include anything from a hollow rumbling feeling of your stomach to experiencing a dull stomach ache. These symptoms may be accompanied by weakness and can be relieved by eating a sufficient quantity of food.

One commonly held assumption is that anytime there is a desire to eat, this is driven biologically by hunger. However, what makes human beings different from animals is that the motivation to eat is not simply driven by the need to feed the body. The desire to eat also has a strong and ever-present psychological component called appetite. Appetite often has very little to do with the body’s nutritional or energy requirements. Instead, it is more associated with habit, smelling, seeing, or even thinking about food. It can be affected by a desire for pleasure or triggered by emotions such as anxiety, loneliness, or depression. Having easy access to an abundance of highly appealing foods can also induce appetite.⁴⁸

For example, when it’s noon, we may feel the desire to eat because we associate that time of day with lunch. Experiencing a sudden craving for pizza in the mid-afternoon after walking by a pizzeria or wanting to eat ice-cream after a satisfying meal are both examples of appetite. These feelings may not be entirely due

to hunger, as they are not necessarily based on physiologic needs. Nevertheless, they can be the over-riding determinant of our desire and decision to eat.

Understanding and recognizing the physical and psychological forces at play is an important element in managing our desire to eat, as it puts this feeling into perspective. Assuming we consume a balanced diet with an appropriate number of calories, that gnawing desire to eat during the Fast is not simply due to physiologic hunger, but also appetite. It is not possible or even desirable to entirely escape these feelings or their cues, as they serve as symbolic reminders of the purpose of fasting. However, acknowledging and understanding them brings us one step closer to more effectively managing and even embracing them, which allows us to use them as tools to more effectively cultivate our spiritual nature during the Fast.

What to Eat

The physical symptoms we feel during the Fast are not intended to punish or cause us suffering. According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, they are intended to serve as a “symbol” and “reminder” of something greater. They should not be the main focus of our spiritual journey during those 19 days. Following proper dietary habits is one way to moderate or even avoid weakness, lightheadedness, headaches, shakiness, or even irritability so these physical symptoms don’t become overly burdensome or debilitating.

Skipping meals, not eating the proper foods, or not eating enough of the right foods can exacerbate some of the normal physiological responses of a 12-hour fast and result in unnecessarily severe physical symptoms. We may consume meals which are balanced in nutrition and digest slowly in the absorption phase. One useful approach to making some food choices is to consider the glycemic index as a guide to the foods we eat.

As discussed previously, blood glucose levels are immediately raised after foods containing carbohydrates (sugars and starches) are eaten and absorbed from the stomach and small intestine. The Glycemic index (GI) categorizes foods according to their potential to raise our blood sugar immediately after a meal. The GI index of foods is classified according to a scale of 0-100; zero corresponding to no rise in blood sugars and 100 corresponding to consuming pure glucose or white bread, as these foods cause the fastest and most dramatic rise in blood sugar levels. The sharper rise in blood sugars associated with high-GI foods is also followed by an earlier and more rapid drop in blood sugar due to the higher insulin levels required to absorb the sugars into our cells. This can often make us feel hungry within a couple of

hours. On the other hand, low-GI foods will be absorbed more gradually, requiring less insulin to stabilize our blood sugar levels. This helps to prevent rapid declines later, making us feel full longer.

It is important to note that protein and fats - such as those contained in meat - do not contain carbohydrates so their effects on our blood sugar immediately after a meal are negligible. As a result, these foods cannot be assigned a GI. However, proteins and fats (not necessarily animal-based) are an important part of any healthy diet and have been shown to moderate hunger and appetite. As a further detailed discussion on GI is beyond the scope of this book, the reader is encouraged to study more about this dietary strategy.

The following are some specific dietary suggestions:

- 1) Don't skip breakfast: Although skipping breakfast may sound tempting, it is not a good practice. According to Bahá'u'lláh, "a light meal in the morning is as a light to the body."⁴⁹ Breakfast regulates your metabolism throughout the entire day and helps prevent overeating later. In addition, by skipping breakfast in the morning to catch an extra hour of sleep, an individual loses a precious opportunity to "refresh and reinvigorate the spiritual forces latent within his soul" through reciting prayers and Writings at dawn.
- 2) Eat protein: High protein foods keep you full longer than high carbohydrate foods. Some examples of high protein foods include beans, lean meats, fish, poultry, eggs, cheese, and natural peanut butter.
- 3) Eat fiber-containing foods: In the absorptive phase, it takes your stomach longer to digest high fiber foods so you remain full longer. Some examples of high fiber foods include bran breakfast cereals, oatmeal (not quick-type), peas, lentils, beans, un-skinned apples and pears, vegetables, whole wheat pasta, brown rice, whole-wheat or multigrain bread.

- 4) Minimize the consumption of refined products such as white rice or white bread: Although these will fill you up immediately after the meal, they contain simple carbohydrates and no fiber making them quickly digestible. As a result, you will likely be hungry 2-3 hours after. Brown rice and whole wheat bread contain unrefined complex carbohydrates and fiber, resulting in slower digestion.
- 5) Eat Healthy Fats: We all need to consume some fat to survive. Fats also help curb hunger. You should choose foods such as nuts, seeds, olive or canola oil, cold-water fish (salmon, mackerel, herring) which contain healthy fats. Animal products such as meat, pork, and some poultry are also a good source of fats. However, as they contain more unhealthy fats, if you choose to eat them, they should be eaten in moderation.
- 6) Avoid Dehydration: More on this in the following section

In summary, perhaps the best advice when it comes to choosing what to eat during the Fast is balance. Make sure you get enough of each food group and minimize the consumption of processed or refined foods.

Reflection

- 1) Think about the concept of glycemic index as well as the dietary suggestions mentioned above and how they may influence the way you eat during the Fast.

Exercise and Physical Activity

There is no “one size fits all” recommendation for when and what type(s) of physical activity is safe during fasting. This is based on multiple factors including your age, fitness level, overall health (including any medications you are taking), environmental temperature and humidity, and the type of work you carry out during the day. In any case, as with any dietary change, it is important to consult your physician if you take medications or have a medical history.

What is known is that physical activity at any time affects your body by increasing your metabolism. This results in faster consumption of your body’s energy stores (especially carbohydrates and fats) as well as fluid and electrolyte losses during activity. Additionally, recovery from physical activity involves replacement of those stores to return to a state of homeostasis or balance. Failure to supply your body with adequate nutrition, calories, and fluids, especially after a strenuous and prolonged exercise session, can result in unpleasant and possibly dangerous symptoms associated with low blood sugar, electrolyte imbalances, and dehydration. The effects of physical activity on the body will depend on the individual as well as the duration and intensity of activity so anyone considering exercising during the Fast should develop a strategy to ensure their body is able to adequately cope.

In this author’s opinion, the fasting period is not the ideal time to begin a strenuous exercise program. However, if you exercise regularly throughout the year and decide to continue exercising during the Fast, it is important to use common sense and listen to your body by choosing the right time and workout intensity for

yourself. According to Bahá’u’lláh, “ Exercise is good when the stomach is empty; it strengthens the muscles. When the stomach is full it is very harmful.”⁵⁰

With this counsel in mind, if you feel weak, lightheaded, or nauseous when exercising on an empty stomach the ideal time for exercise may be after a small snack after sunset or before dawn; you can finish the remainder of your meal after your exercise session. If you live in an area with hot and humid weather or plan to undergo strenuous exercise lasting more than one hour, you may lose up to 2-3L/h of sweat. As a result, you should consider planning your workouts in the late afternoon or evening when you are able to replenish lost fluids and electrolytes, both during and immediately after exercise, in order to prevent dehydration.

Keeping Hydrated

Water is essential to life. To keep hydrated, we need to balance water intake and water loss. Human beings can live weeks without food but can only live 2-3 days without water. It comprises approximately 60 percent of our body mass, which is equivalent to approximately 45 liters in a 70kg man and 30 liters in a 50kg woman. A loss of only 2% of our body's total water volume will result in impairment in our ability to think and our physical performance. It can also result in headaches, nausea, constipation, irritability, and fatigue.

Specific water requirements vary from individual to individual depending on environmental temperature, clothing, physical activity level, diet, medications, and overall health. It is estimated that approximately 1/3 of daily water intake comes from foods while the remainder comes from beverages. The World Health Organization recommends that, under average conditions, sedentary men should consume 2.9 liters/day while women should consume 2.2 liters/day. More active adults living in high temperatures may require greater than 4.5 liters per day for both men and women.⁵¹

Thirst is not always an accurate indicator of how much fluid our body requires. This is especially true when we are sweating heavily. We should continue to drink regularly during waking hours from sunset to dawn to ensure water stores are adequately replenished for the next fasting day. However, we should also keep in mind Bahá'u'lláh's counsel "Do not drink after you have retired to sleep."⁵²

Although not perfect, a useful way of determining the body's fluid balance is by observing urine color and volume.

Urine tends to be dilute and, thus, very pale in color when large volumes are excreted. It tends to be darker when small and more concentrated volumes are excreted.⁵³ A useful rule of thumb is that if a person produces about 1-2 liters of slightly yellow urine a day, he is probably getting enough water. If one's urine is dark yellow and needs to urinate less than four times a day, he is probably not drinking enough. Additional signs of inadequate fluid intake may include dry mouth, headache, light-headedness, irritability, and constipation.

Another strategy to ensure one is getting enough fluids during the Fast is to drink 1-2 glasses of liquid with before each meal and make sure to drink regularly between dinner and bedtime.

Some Recommendations for Preparing to Fast

Depending on a person's daily habits and personal experience with fasting, a good beginning to the Fast may require some preparation beforehand. Preparing for the Fast can allow us to more fully experience and enjoy the rewards and bounties during the Fast.

Most of us have daily routines, habits and even addictions that may have been acquired recently or over the years. For some, overcoming these may seem too difficult and may discourage an individual from even attempting to Fast. Abruptly altering some of these habits may result in significant physical and/or psychological disruptions.

As with any journey, however, how well you prepare for Fast can have a direct effect on your experience, especially during the first days of the Fast. The following are some suggestions to help prepare:

- 1) Continuing to drink several cups of caffeine-containing beverages—such as coffee and tea—on a daily basis until the day before the Fast begins can cause significant symptoms often associated with caffeine withdrawal, especially during the first days of the Fast. If you routinely consume caffeine-containing products on a daily basis, begin gradually reducing the amount you drink each day approximately 1-2 weeks before the Fast and replace these with a non-caffeine containing beverage. This will give your body time to adjust without caffeine and will reduce or entirely avoid symptoms associated with caffeine withdrawal, which can include headache, nausea, and irritability.
- 2) Skipping breakfast deprives the body of a meal that is a foundation for regulating your metabolism and dietary patterns

throughout the rest of the day. If you routinely skip breakfast throughout the year, start eating a light balanced breakfast 1-2 weeks before the Fast to get your mind and body more adjusted to the practice. Remember, in today's world, the desire to eat is often not solely based on actual physiologic hunger but habit as well.

- 3) Plan meals several days ahead of time by purchasing and storing the proper foods as well as developing a menu of what will be consumed for breakfast and dinner each day of the week. This will allow you to mentally prepare and will ensure that you have the proper foods readily available at home, making it more likely that you will eat them.
- 4) Telling your friends and family about your plan to Fast and the reasons for doing so can also be helpful, as it may increase the level of support and encouragement around you. It is also an opportunity to teach.
- 5) During the Intercalary Days, devote special time each day for reflection, meditation, and prayer on fasting. This will help you mentally and spiritually prepare for the 19- day journey ahead.

Reflection

- 1) List some ways that you can personally prepare for the Fast.
- 2) What are some dietary habits that you need to be aware of before the Fast.

Putting it into Action

After studying this booklet, the author hopes that the reader gained a greater understanding and appreciation for the Bahá'í Fast. One may have doubts as to whether he will be able to observe the Fast spiritually or physically. The ability to observe the Fast does not come easy for many. We may have been unsuccessful abstaining from food or drink during our previous attempts. We should not be discouraged but, rather, should try and try again as fasting, being one of the “two mightiest pillars of God’s holy Law”, is an incumbent law of God and requires perseverance and patience in the practice until its goals are achieved.

*“Even though outwardly the Fast is difficult and toilsome, yet inwardly it is bounty and tranquility. Purification and training are conditioned and dependent only on such rigorous exercises as are in accord with the Book of God and sanctioned by Divine law, not those which the deluded have inflicted upon the people. Whatsoever God hath revealed is beloved of the soul. We beseech Him that He may graciously assist us to do that which is pleasing and acceptable unto Him.”*⁵⁴

*“The laws of God, such as fasting, Obligatory Prayer and the like, as well as His counsels regarding virtues, good deeds, and proper conduct, must be carried out everywhere to the extent possible, unless some insurmountable obstacle or some great danger presents itself or it runneth counter to the dictates of wisdom. For indolence and laxity hinder the outpourings of love from the clouds of divine mercy, and people will thus remain deprived.”*⁵⁵

We may not initially “feel” the benefits of fasting, as we accumulate many layers of mindless habits and distractions over our lifetime. This does not mean, however, that we haven’t benefited from it. The benefits are often more mysterious than they are obvious. Bahá'u'lláh had written:

*“There are various stages and stations for the Fast and innumerable effects and benefits are concealed therein.”*⁵⁶

*“These are, O my God, the days whereon Thou didst enjoin Thy servants to observe the Fast...Thou hast endowed every hour of these days with a special virtue...”*⁵⁷

It is important that we strive to cultivate our spirituality by making every effort to mindfully observe the Laws of God. Spiritual growth is a gradual, never-ending process and fasting is, essential for that development.

The Guardian tells us:

“It is often difficult for us to do things because they are so very different from what we are used to, not because the thing itself is particularly difficult. With you, and indeed most Bahá'ís, who are now, as adults, accepting this glorious Faith, no doubt some of the ordinances, like fasting and daily prayer, are hard to understand and obey at first. But we must always think that these things are given to all men for a thousand years to come. For Bahá'í children who see these things practiced in the home, they will be as natural and necessary a thing as going to church on Sunday was to the more pious generation of Christians. Bahá'u'lláh would not have given us these things if they would not greatly benefit us, and, like children who are sensible enough to realize their father is wise and does what is good for them, we must accept to obey these ordinances even though at

*first we may not see any need for them. As we obey them we will gradually come to see in ourselves the benefits they confer.*⁵⁸

The Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have made it clear what some of the other essential prerequisites are for spiritual growth. In one of their letters, the Universal House of Justice summarized these as follows:⁵⁹

- 1) The recital each day of one of the Obligatory Prayers with pure-hearted devotion.
- 2) The regular reading of the Sacred Scriptures, specifically at least each morning and evening, with reverence, attention and thought.
- 3) Prayerful meditation on the Teachings, so that we may understand them more deeply, fulfill them more faithfully, and convey them more accurately to others.
- 4) Striving every day to bring our behavior more into accordance with the high standards that are set forth in the Teachings.
- 5) Teaching the Cause of God.
- 6) Selfless service in the work of the Cause and in carrying on of our trade or profession.

Fasting is a perfect time to reflect, take spiritual inventory, and to physically, mentally, and spiritually recalibrate in order to better align your life with each of these prerequisites for the coming year.

*“Blessed is the one who through the heat generated by the Fast increaseth his love, and who, with joy and radiance, ariseth to perform worthy deeds. Verily, He guideth whomsoever He willeth to the straight path.”*⁶⁰

Conclusion

After reading this booklet, you hopefully have a greater awareness of, not only the meaning and importance of Bahá'í fasting, but also how to prepare for and manage more effectively during the Fast.

The world around us can be very distracting with diversions and disruptions. Despite all of this, the path towards spiritual transformation is gradual but certain, if we remain obedient to the laws of Bahá'u'lláh. Self-awareness, thoughtful planning, and perseverance are essential if we are to enjoy and achieve both the physical and spiritual goals of fasting.

As we gain greater experience in fasting over the years to come, we will notice that our experiences during and as a result of the Fast will undoubtedly vary from year to year and will be different from others who are fasting. This is to be expected. There are no outcomes that determine whether we have successfully observed the Fast or not. This will be for Bahá'u'lláh to decide.

The important thing is that we practice obedience to one of “the most great ordinances of this Dispensation.”

To further pursue an understanding and appreciation for Fasting, the compilation “The Importance of Obligatory Prayer and Fasting.”⁴³ may be studied.

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Happy Fasting

A Healthy Approach to the Bahá'í Fast

Saeid Mirafzali, M.D.

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Dedication

This booklet is dedicated to my wife Shahrzad and children Niki, Ryan, and Sofie.

I would also like to thank Cindy Savage for her time editing the text and Lua Wilkinson, MA, RD for her review of the nutritional aspects of the text.

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ISBN: 978-81-7896-063-0

First Edition: January 2013



Published by:

Bahá'í Publishing Trust

F-3/6, Okhla Industrial Area, Phase-I

New Delhi-110020, India

Contents

The Universal House of Justice, in reviewing the further applicability of the laws of Bahá'u'lláh in the course of the past four years, determined that it is imperative for all Bahá'ís "to deepen their awareness of the blessings conferred by the laws which directly foster the devotional life of the individual and, thus, of the community." Among these laws are Obligatory Prayer and fasting which have been characterized by the Blessed Beauty as "two wings to man's life."

May 2000, The Universal House of Justice

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Prologue

The 19-Day Fast is one of the great bounties Bahá'u'lláh has bestowed upon mankind. As a physician I have had the opportunity to observe the reactions of friends and co-workers during the Fast. I often get concerned looks and comments suggesting that fasting from sunrise to sunset is equivalent to “starvation” or somehow depriving my body of the nutrition it needs to function throughout the day. Others mention that they have tried fasting but were unsuccessful because they were “too hungry” or became “very weak” or “shaky.”

As one element of the Fast does require you to abstain from food and drink for roughly 12 hours each day, a basic understanding of digestion and metabolism will, hopefully, dispel the concern that the Fast is more than an otherwise healthy body can and should handle. Far from it: Your body was designed to maintain proper function during short periods of fasting—for example, when you sleep overnight.

Feelings of hunger and weakness are quite natural and even conducive to the fasting experience. However, they should not become so overwhelming as to prevent an individual from fasting. Understanding the difference between hunger and appetite, as well as their causes, can help us to more effectively manage your desire to eat during the fast. Having a basic understanding of nutrition can go a long way towards helping to plan meals with the goal of maintaining adequate energy levels throughout the day and curbing severe hunger.

The Bahá'í Writings teach us that physical abstinence from food or drink is not the primary purpose of the 19-Day Fast but, rather, symbolic of something greater. As such, this book is not

intended to draw attention away from the greater. Instead, it is intended to help you to focus on the greater by offering spiritual, psychological and physical insights as well as knowledge and awareness that will help relieve you from unnecessary and potentially overwhelming concerns, doubts, and feelings you may experience about fasting.

If you are a Bahá'í but have never observed the 19-Day Fast, this module will hopefully encourage and assist you to begin doing so. However, for anyone reading this booklet, it will hopefully take you one step closer to making fasting a time of rejuvenation and spiritual liberation.

Purpose:

- To gain a greater awareness of the divine purpose behind fasting.
- To gain a greater awareness of the role of fasting in our spiritual lives.
- To understand the meaning of fasting beyond abstaining from food.
- To understand the role of prayer, meditation, and reflection.
- To understand what happens to our body during fasting and why fasting is not harmful to our body.
- To understand some of the elements which create a desire to eat during fasting.
- To understand cultural practices which might inhibit people from fasting.
- To review simple dietary guidelines which can make the physical practice of fasting more manageable.

Practice:

- To prepare for the 19-Day Fast this year.
- To observe the Bahá'í 19-Day Fast this year.