

## Fasting

Before fasting, read and follow this guidance:-

**1 Intention.** Why are we fasting? Do we want to lose some weight, feel good that we are helping a cause, health reasons, join in because everybody else is, challenge or punish ourselves, join a demo', speak truth to power, connect to the Divine? All kinds of reasons, conscious and unconscious, may be present. These should not necessarily stop us fasting, but being honest with ourselves about our motivation is important. Fasting has been traditionally associated with religious and spiritual needs, but it has also come to be used as a means of protest, expressing solidarity, caring for the planet [e.g. by abstaining from meat consumption] and the growing evidence of health benefits from occasional fasting.

**2 It's not punishment, but renunciation.** Using fasting as a means of self-abnegation or bodily torment is suspect and unhealthy. We do not necessarily have to suffer to effect change in ourselves or the world. Renunciation is a willingness to let go of some things, temporarily or permanently, in order to receive others or to simply be receptive to the spaciousness that putting aside all manner of distractions can bring. At the same time this 'letting go' can include giving up goal orientation; wanting to 'get' something. Through fasting we create 'space' by setting aside the usual routines, thoughts and activities that fill our lives, hearts and minds. This space permits new possibilities to be imagined; insights and understandings that can later be integrated into our lives. It might be that this 'space' affects others and the world where our fast causes others to think, be challenged or feel supported. It might be in our relationship with the Absolute, whatever we experience that to be. In the space that fasting offers we may find connections deepening with the personal, the interpersonal and the transpersonal – the self, others and that which lies beyond the self. [The longest fast I have undertaken was 7 days. In that time I took only water and a little fruit juice. At a simple practical level, I found that I had a great deal more time available when I no longer had to shop for, prepare, eat and clear up after meals. That time was filled with deep reflection, reading, clarification of some problems in life, deepening my relationship with the Beloved, greater knowledge of my body and what makes 'me' tick].

**3 It's not just food and drink.** Fasting can mean renouncing other things that occupy us – work, conversation, accessing social media, sex, TV, hobbies, thinking and planning, fixing and problem solving, habits and routines. Often in fasting we stretch ourselves most by renouncing for a little while those things to which we are most attached. Thus it is important to clarify what we will include or exclude in our fast and why.

**4 Stay open and receptive** to what this time of fasting has to show. Follow practices that encourage insight and reflection – meditate, pray, read inspiring words or listen to inspiring music, journal about what impact the fast is having [on body, heart, mind and spirit], sit or exercise in nature, create a beautiful, not to say

sacred, space in our environment, practise silence and solitude [any of these and more if they are not part of our fast]. At the same time we need to be wary of filling the space with such practices because we find the silence and stillness uncomfortable. Each moment and experience can be a teaching; listen and see. If our fast has a collective reason, e.g. to show solidarity with others or a cause, then re-minding ourselves [e.g. by meditating or praying at certain times] of that purpose during the fast may be helpful.

**5 Choose the time and manner of the fast.** Is the intention to abstain from food and drink completely for our selected time – a day or part thereof, two days, a week? If not complete abstinence, a pattern might include a light breakfast followed by nothing for the rest of the day until a light supper, or breakfast the next day. There are many options. We need to be willing to stretch ourselves, but not set impossible goals or get caught up in a need to suffer.

**6 Some suggestions about food and drink.** Whatever pattern we choose to follow:-

- Take a light meal before the fast begins either the evening or morning before.
- Eat only organic foods before and after where possible.
- Stay off tea or coffee and other stimulants, alcohol and drugs except prescription medication.
- Drink only filtered/spring water, not from plastic containers, and at least 2 litres per day. Stay hydrated.
- If hunger becomes really unbearable, drink more water. Or have a little organic fruit juice and/or a few nuts or seeds, taking them very slowly. Make consuming them a meditation in itself.
- When the fast is over, do not go immediately back to a normal diet and full meals. Make the first meal a very light one [small amounts, no alcohol, avoid fatty and processed foods] and gradually return to normal diet over the coming days. A fast, even a short one, can 'shrink' the stomach so that we may feel full quickly, and nauseated if we over-eat.

**7 Expect to feel** faint, very hungry, irritable, tired and lacking concentration, especially in the first 24 hours. There's no need to push ourselves. Rest and sleep if needed. Take only gentle exercise. Let the body adapt to new rhythms. If it all becomes unbearable discern if we need to stop or if we feel we can carry on. Sometimes the hunger can make us quite fierce in pursuit of food and things we would normally ignore become inflated. An ad' in the street for a snack can suddenly take on giant proportions, we smell food even when there is none there, we salivate at the thought of it. [Once, while fasting on retreat at a Franciscan friary, the brothers put me in a room immediately above the kitchens! I took a walk outdoors and I'll swear everyone in the street was eating ice cream, every shop was selling fish and chips, and every truck was a store of fruit and veg!]

**8 Check with a medical practitioner.** If we have health challenges that can be compromised by fasting from food and drink [e.g. diabetes], then it is best not to fast in this way. When in doubt, don't. We can choose other things from which we can fast [see 3 above], and we can still engage with others in solidarity e.g. in prayer and meditation.

**9 Stop if feeling unwell** and if anticipated symptoms [as at 7] persist. Consult a health practitioner if necessary.

**10 Notify** one or more others of our fast, where we are and when we expect it to end.

**11 Write, draw, paint, sculpt** or use other creative ways to capture something of the experience so that there is a record to revisit in the future.

**12 Allow time for integration and discernment afterwards.** There is a fine dividing line between illumination and illusion. Share the experiences in the fast, before taking any actions, with a trusted guide, spiritual director, counsellor or group. We can return to our notes about our fast at some point in the future, perhaps 6 months or a year's time initially, to see what new insights emerge for us. The impact of a fast invariably lasts way beyond the here and now.