

Apprehending Concept, Canons and Types of Fasting in Buddhism

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Abstract—To fast is to “keep away from all or a few sorts of nourishment or drink, particularly as a religious observance”. It has been practiced globally in different forms since the time of earliest civilizations and it is used for different commitments like religious, cultural, and political purposes. Recently, there has been renewed interest in fasting for its dietary and health benefits with advancements in technology and health awareness of people. The fasting products food market is also establishing its roots in global food market.

Worldwide Buddhism have more than 500 million followers. It is considered as one of the major religion in world. Buddhism is the major faith in many Asian countries, counting Mongolia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Laos, Bhutan, Cambodia, Vietnam and Taiwan. The quantity of Buddhist followers in India and china is also major contributor to overall Buddhist population of globe. There are many research going on effects and benefits of fasting specially in Ramadan (Islamic) fasting. Along with Islamic fasting other religious fasting are also been studied in detail all over the globe. Unexpectedly, there is no/very less research work is conducted in the field of Buddhist fasting. Possibly because of this many doctors and healthcare professionals are not aware about needs and challenges faced by the individuals particularly observing Buddhist fasting. It is essential to understand Buddhist fasting in better way. In this review paper, attempt is made to understand concept, importance, origin and different types of fasting in Buddhism along with its practices and rules.

Keywords— *Buddhist Fasting, Vassa, The Middle Way, Nyungne, Upavasa, Anasana. Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana, Dhutanga.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Fasting in simple world is the action of willingly withdrawing from few or all foods, beverages, or both, for a specific tenure [1]. Fasting is advised in almost every major religion [2]. Critics sometimes regard these practices as just a religious thing but with help of research and scientific knowledge it is proven that they are not just religious things but practices based on an ethical and psychological insight. with scientific research it has been proven that good controlled regular fasting has positive effect on health, though it was found long fasts exceeding four days can be hazardous [3, 4]. The initial great thinkers, intellectuals, and healer advocates fasting for good health and also used it for the therapeutic cause [5]. Plato, Hippocrates, Aristotle, Socrates and all other great philosophers and health practitioners all admired the assistances of fasting for health [6]. Energizing and rejuvenating power of fasting was documented and promoted

by early healing arts. In ancient time, during spring of fall equinoxes, religious and spiritual groups observed fasting as part of rituals, rites and ceremonies [7, 8]. For the different spiritual benefits, every major religion advice and practice fasting [9, 10, 11]. It is also advised in many religions to offer food for the people who don't get proper meal [12, 13]. By sacrificing a food for once or twice or for any other tenure, individual can give food to those who are hungry and to those who can't afford it.

Santhana, which is fasting till death is practiced by Jains [14]. There are other various types of fasting observed by them. In the honor of the fast observed by Christ during his temptation in the desert, for forty-day partial fast is observed in many Churches all over the world, which is known as The Lenten fast [15, 16]. 40 days fast was observed by Jesus once and fasting is repeatedly cited in the Bible [17, 18]. Fasting is also a significant fragment of Hinduism, where many Hindus fast on specific days of the month. The type of fast and the time of fasting depends on the deity of devotee. Devotees fast on the certain day of week according to their respective god. For example, Lord Hanuman's devotees fast on Saturday while devotees of Sai baba fast on Thursday. Hindu fast for the period of religious festivals like Maha-Shivaratri. Navaratri festival 'Nine Nights festival' where fasting is observed for nine days [19]. At the end of sanctified month of Ramadan, (Islamic sacred month of fasting) Muslims all over the world celebrate Eid or Eid-ul-Fitr. During this month the Muslims do not consume food from sunrise to sunset. Muslims fast to improve self-control and it is a sign of their faith and appreciation. In Buddhism, fasting is preliminary stage of self-discipline to acquire self-control [20].

II. FASTING

Fasting has been accomplished since ancient times by peoples around the globe. Books on ethnology and religions describe an outstanding health effects and welfares of fasting forms and practices [21]. Nearly all medical organizations in the world admit the therapeutic benefits of it. In medical terms, the word 'fasting' can be defined as “voluntary abstinence from taking food for varying spans of time” [22]. Fasting at broad-spectrum is observed for spiritual purpose, for fitness or for therapeutic reasons. Sometimes it is also used for political purposes [23]. For the individuals who are preparing to undertake certain medical surgery are also advised to observe fasting [24]. Fasting of one kind or alternative and for one period or another is practiced in almost all religions. Fasting in Buddhism referred as upavasa or anasana. Fasting, even life-threatening fasting, formed a part of the self-mortification

(attakilamathàna yoga) observed by ascetics [25]. When Buddha tried extreme fasting for himself, he found that it is not useful and contradictory to the path of buddhism. But comparatively short timed and supervised fasting can be helpful for meditation. This short term fasting is observed by all foremost Buddhist traditions though there are no clear rules are provided by Buddha. There are many different ways of fasting but in buddhism it is completely up to individual and his religious teacher to select the fasting method. Rejection of complete food is not necessary part of Buddhist fasting [26]. After enlightenment Buddha never fasted for long time but he observed short type fasting which he guided for monks. For Bhikkus, it is advised to have control on diet and not to have food after noontime [28]. Even now a days Monks and nuns abstain from diet from noon to morning of subsequent day, this is one sort of intermittent fasting. They are permitted to have some particular liquids during fasting time [29]. Nyungne is practiced by Tibetan Buddhist, which have strict vows and fasting. Lay Buddhist followers observing the uposatha will also withdraw from foodstuff from noon to morning of next day. The Buddha's endorsement for monks and nuns to abstain from food at night seems to have been completely for the cause of health. Long fasts are found to be not good for health in some situations. Buddha also guided to have a middle way and to avoid extremes in case of fasting too [30]. Fasting in Buddhism is purely to improve control of one's affections so the mind can be unconstrained to grow advanced consciousness. Also fasting can be done so that one confines from a desire (food) and dedicate it to someone in need. Fundamentally, to confine one's body from the normal food consumption is to develop discipline, consciousness, self-control and even gratitude for everything one has.

III. ORIGIN OF FASTING IN BUDDHISM

Origin of fasting in general is hard to find as early man may have fast for his existence. Due to unavailability of food he may have adopted different kind of fasting techniques. Even in animal kingdom every animal fasts during stress or illness [31]. It was found that some animals fast for a normal uneasiness. Fasting is natural propensity of all organisms including humans and other animals [32]. It is natural to pursue rest, equilibrium and to preserve energy at acute times. Fasting must be acknowledged as an essential and radical method that is older than any other method of caring for the ill organism, for it is working on the plane of instincts.

In case of Buddhism, fasting starts with its initial stage as Buddha's divine awakening was associated to fasting. Before becoming Buddha (the awakened one) young prince Siddhartha left his family and household in quest of enlightenment [33]. In Initial stage of his journey under severe austerities and intense mental concentration he practiced fasting. His fasting continued for six years due to which body was converted in to set of bones with some flesh covering it [34]. When he realized that basic cause of samsara is desire, he thought that fasting is among methods to overcome this desire. He was surviving only on single grain of rice per day. Buddha wanted to censored the affection to the senses starting with superfluous indulgence in foodstuff and so on. During his fast his body was having pain, complications and weakness due to intense fasting but still he continued his fast. At one stage, he no longer had the power to meditate for his cause [35]. He comprehended he would die earlier than the day when he achieves liberation due to the

'abuse' he put on his physique. It was then that a native Brahmin's daughter, named as Sujata, come up to him and presented him a vessel filled with rice prepared in the essence of milk [36]. He regained his strength, he again started his meditation, then time come when he comprehended Buddhahood. Siddhartha became Buddha only after he left intense fasting and accepting food from the girl. After that he preached the way he found the best: Middle way, a path where extremes of indulgence and mortification should be avoided and moderation should be accepted.

IV. THE MIDDLE WAY

According to Tripitaka (collection of Buddhist scriptures), Buddha received wrong guidance that through practicing extreme fasting he can achieve wisdom [37]. He fasted for very long time with intense desire about enlightenment but instead of wisdom he was just suffering. After 6yrs, he comprehended that punishing will not lead to enlightenment. Then he stopped his fast and tried other means for his quest. When he achieved his enlightenment, he guided "middle way" among deprivation and gluttony. Buddha, guided his followers to avoid extremes.

Fasting is a supplementary technique for improving the impacts of meditation and this is a persistent theme amongst every Buddhist schools [38]. Middle way is replicated in rules concerning to food. In the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, monastics mostly eat two light veggie meals every day. In Theravada custom, monastics go without food from noon. They consume only one little meal before noon [39]. Although the prominence is on moderation in diet, fasting has its own importance. Fasting in the Buddhist monastic society is a "dhutanga" practice which means "to shake up" or "invigoration." Dhutangas are precise list of 13 practices, 4 of which are related to food: consuming once a day, consuming at one sitting, reducing the amount of consumption, on alms-round, consuming only the food that they get at the initial seven households [40]. All fasts are observed with the will of individual; fasting is observed voluntarily; It is not mandatory in the usual progression of a Buddhist monastic's lifetime of exercise.

V. THE THERAVADA TRADITION

In the Theravada custom of Asia, monastics infrequently fast for meditation as a religious practice which is known as Vassa [41]. The main aim of observing this fasting is to comprehend craving in an experiential way and, if possible, to grasp a state where mind is at harmony regardless of body's uneasiness. Mostly these fasts are supervised by the experts and eldest monastic. They also calculate the time of fasting for younger monastics. Time periods of fasts are elastic in nature and it will totally depend on the monastic approach for fasting [42].

A. Vassa Fasting

The tradition of Vassa was there before Buddha. From the time of Buddha, followers of Theravada Buddhism observe the fast for three months of lunar calendar which is generally during rainy season. Vassa means rainy retreat in Pali language. This fast in Myanmar is known as 'War Dwin' while in English it is referred as 'Buddhist lent.' This fast is observed for 12hrs from 12pm to 12am. Fast can be broken at any time between midnight to noon next day [43]. As this fast

is for three months with 12-hourly cycles of fasting and feasting it become complicated task for followers. Physical and mental strength is required for successful completion of fast for whole three months.

It was ancient tradition in India, that monastics should not travel during rainy season as they may get harmed or harm crops or insects during their journey to other places. Vassa is followed during three lunar months which is usually in civil calendar from July to October. For the Vassa monastics continue to live at one residence, characteristically a village monasteries or any temple in the area. For some monks along with Vassa it is time for intensive meditation, they dedicate themselves for it. Many lay Buddhist followers choose to observe Vassa. They practice Vassa by implementing good practices like not eating meat, not consuming alcohol or quit smoking [44]. It is very common practice in monasteries to express the monk's age in monastery by counting number of vassas from the date of his ordination.

VI. THE MAHAYANA TRADITION

Occasional fasting for 18, 36 and rarely for 72 was observed by monastics in east Asian Mahayana Buddhist schools. Like other Buddhist practices this fast is also observed with in correlation with meditation. This fasting is carried out to purify individual's body, increase psychological clarity and develop wisdom while encountering the impacts of craving on concentration [45]. This kind of fasting is not a requirement of tradition but still practiced by monastics. When someone decides to observe such kind of fasting he/she consume only dry bread for 3 days for preparing themselves for no food condition for coming fasting days. 18 Days fast was mostly observed with little amount of water consumption daily. The most critical time of this type of fasting is ending which is also supervised [46]. Where only small amount of thin porridge or gruel is given to the fasting individuals after specific amount of time for three days, up to the gastrointestinal system has fully recovered. 'Thirty-six days' fast is allowed only after successful compilation of 18 days fast. This fasting is totally depends on individuals nothing is mandatory. It was also found that some individuals have extended fasting periods gradually over years to observe fasting up to 72 days [47]. This is extreme practices which is not recommended to everyone. This fasting is conducted with proper guidance, supervision of specialists and after taking all required steps.

VII. THE VAJRAYANA TRADITION

In Tibetan Vajrayana customs, 2 days long fast is a common practice. Two-day long fast is observed as part of *Nyungne* ceremony which involved chanting and meditation [48]. This is practiced because it is considered that it purifies the human body along with reduction in negative karma. For tantric goals some experienced practitioners sometimes fast for longer periods. Tantric goals for such fasting are mostly to increase body's special abilities like controlling body heat, mind control [49]. It was also found that this longer fasting is observed to stimulating body's deterioration leading up to death. In Vajrayana tradition fasting is not mandatory and rules and regulations governing fasting are principally up to the superiors of specific practitioners.

A. The Nyungne Method

It is extensively accomplished in Tibet. Nyungne is a technique of physical, mental and spiritual refining. This is practiced by extensive range of Buddhist followers, particularly those who have taken the Bodhisattva vows. Nyungne be made up of 2 days of fasting. Where 1st day is the initial day and second day is real fasting day. During first day it is advised that individual should take one vegetarian lunch/meal before noon. This meal should be free from onions, garlic, radish, eggs and most importantly meat of any kind [50]. Light liquids are allowed during fast. Recommendations are given for the selection of liquids i.e. juices with pulp can't be consumed while beverages can be taken while water is allowed, milk in tea is allowed while glass of milk is prohibited. The second day when the actual fast starts, individuals are not allowed to eat or drink anything. It means no water, medicine etc. Speaking is also prohibited during second day. The fast is considered to be over on the morning of third day [51].

It was believed that, purification of obscurations of body is done by fasting from food and drink; fasting related to speaking (quietness) purifies the obscurations of talking and the fasting of mind (meditation) purifies the obscurations of concentration. It was also said that fasting have positive impacts on illness. This fast is about physical, mental and verbal actions to abstain from ignorant, irritated, angry and clinging approaches. For better execution of this fast, eight Mahayana precepts are taken by the individuals which are:

- Not to kill (No killing of humans or animals).
- Not to steal.
- Not to include in any sexual activity,
- Not to lie to anyone even in jest.
- Abstain from intoxicants (alcohol, cigarettes, drugs etc.),
- Abstain from coquettish behavior
- Abstain from inappropriate nourishment
- Avoid high seats or beds [52].

VIII. BUDDHIST LAY-PRACTITIONER'S FASTING

It is uncommon for non-monastics to carry out long-term fasts in any Buddhist tradition. However, it was found that numerous lay-practitioners frequently join monastics on "uposatha" days, or sanctified full moon fasting practice, though this fasting is not required for any Buddhist not even for monastics. In Buddhist way of fasting many individuals avoid eating non-vegetarian diet for one day in week [53]. They also avoid eating after noon for self-control. It was also found that drinking water and other fluids during fast is allowed in all traditions of Buddhism.

As there are different kind of fasting are available in Buddhism. One of them is "zhai" in which community have one type of fasting. In Chinese 'zhai' meaning at the same time one will be vegetarian and fasting [54]. Removing meat from diet for specific days or time periods is also considered as one the fasting method. Most often people restrict themselves from eating meat on new or full moon days or six or eight times a day. The principle behind this kind of fasting is to restrict foods

which are consumed to satisfy the desire of good taste and flavors. It is considered that such kind of fasting also brings value to the fasting individuals. But in case of monastics its different, they observe fast because it is a difficult practice which lead to better self-control. Which is undertaken under the guidance and supervision of skilled persons.

IX. EXEMPTION FROM FASTING

As Buddhism is about middle way fasting for shorter version is considered to be good but never forced on anyone. Fasting is advised to monks and nuns but still is not compulsory for them. Buddhist lay-practitioners also practice fast but it is not also forced to them. Youngsters hardly fast in any technique associated with the Buddhist faith [55].

CONCLUSION

Given the large and growing numbers of people observing different kind of fasting around the world, there is an increasing need for information about fasting practices in 2,500 year old religion which is full of knowledge and useful information. The concept and canons of fasting are so very much incorporated and interlaced in the vast practices of Buddhist fasting. Buddhism advocates, acknowledges and admires beneficial effects of fasting during meditation and day to day life. Buddhism guide to have middle way in fasting too. Buddhism denies extreme fasting on the other hand it also recommends not to eat food after noon to next day mooring which is also kind of intermittent fasting. According to Buddhism desire of any kind will not lead to enlightenment or true happiness, Fasting is one of the practice which allow people to have control on the desire.

There are various types of fasting in Buddhism all over the world. The Nyungne Method and Vassa are mostly practiced along with dhutanga. Fasting in Buddhism is not mandatory for anyone. It is recommended for monk and nuns only but many Buddhist followers observe fasting. Youngsters don't observe fasting in any of the discipline of Buddhism. Buddhism is worlds 4th major religion having more than 500 million practitioners which is 7% of the global population. Many individuals from Buddhism observe different kinds of fasting but there are very few studies conducted on the health effect, physiological effects and mental effects of these kinds of fasting. There is need of more research on Buddhist fasting.

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