Why do we fast?

The purpose of fasting symbolises self-control. Since food is seen as the most common weakness in humankind, control over eating is seen as a difficult task. In Sanskrit fasting is called 'Upavaasa,' which translates to "Upa" (near) and "Vaasa" (to stay). Upavaasa therefore means staying near the Lord, in this context.

In the Yajur-Veda, 19.30, it is said:

'Mankind develops the ability for progressive living through fasts that serve as diksha (initiation) From diksha one moves to dakshina, that is, whatever one does, one finds success. From this, faith and devotion grow, and from them, one attains truth of one's aim in life '

WHY?

To overcome imperfections and tensions that are a part of modern life, the best solution is self-purification through fasting. Through fasting one develops greater harmony; these develop other abilities and powers within a person.

Most devout Hindus are known to fast regularly or on special occasions. These fasts require one to not eat at all, eat once with fruits or a special

diet of simple food. Some undertake rigorous fasts where they do not consume any food or liquid at all!

Fasting is not intended to make one weaker, irritable or create an urge to indulge later. This is usually experienced when there is no noble goal behind the fast. The Bhagavad Gita urges all to eat appropriately, neither too much nor too little and to eat simple, pure and healthy food (a saatvik diet) when not fasting.



WHEN?

With seven days in the week, a different form of God is said to govern each day. Depending upon the purpose of the day, one fasts accordingly. A common reason for fasting is to get over the malefic effects of a particular God or planet, or to achieve your goal through blessings from the Divine. Each day requires one to read a different katha, recite a different Aarti and carry out a specific form of worship.

Sunday is devoted to Surya, the Sun. When fasting on Sunday, food is eaten once in the day before sunset. The food must not be tamsika (food that develops ignorance) or contain any oil or salt. When inclined to give charity it is custom to give wheat, red pulses, jaggery, metals or gems.

Monday is devoted to Chandrama, the Moon. Many Hindus observe 'saumya pradosh' where they fast for 16 Mondays to seek pardon for their faults. You are permitted to eat once a day with the allowance of cereal consumption. When inclined to give charity it is custom to give white items such as rice, pearls, white clothes etc.

Tuesday is devoted to Mangal (Mars). Many Hindus observe this fast for 12 consecutive Tuesdays. Prayers are offered to Lord Hanuman and food is prepared from wheat and jaggery with its consumption once in the day.

Wednesday is devoted to Budh (Mercury). One is expected to eat green things once a day and prayers are offered to Lord Shiva. When inclined to give charity it is custom to give green gram, musk, blue clothes, gold, copper or five gems.

Thursday is devoted to Brihaspati (Jupiter). Prayers are offered to Brihespeshwar Mahadev (Lord Shiva) and food must be consumed once a day with yellow pulses. When inclined to give charity it is custom to give turmeric, salt, yellow clothes, yellow pulses, gold or topaz.

Friday is devoted to Shukra (Venus). This fast requires you to eat once a day with the consumption of white preparations such as rice porridge and milk preparations. Those inclined to charity must give rice, white clothes, ghee, diamond or gold.

Saturday is devoted to Shani (Saturn). Shani is fond of black items such as clothes, sesame seeds, iron and oil. When inclined to give charity one should give blacking things.

Many Vaishnavas (devotees of Lord Vishnu) choose to fast on Ekadashi (11th day of the lunar month) out of austerity to purify themselves and spend greater time in prayer and worship. Similarly, many people fast on important festivals such as Ram Navmi, Mahashivratri or Krishna Janmashtami. This has the benefits

of austerity but also the practical motive in that less time can be spent in preparing food and more time in worshipping Bhagavan.

Fasting has various health benefits that are finally being uncovered by the scientific world. It is an ancient practice that is not exclusive to Hindus alone: nearly every culture has incorporated fasts as part of their lives.

Mentioned in

Vedas and Bhagavad Gita

When

Chosen day of the week, Ekadashi or special ustav

What

Prayer, Aarti, food and charity

Goal

Self control, harmony, specific goals

