

Fasting (Unto Death) by Children*

Vijay K. Jain**

All activities (read yoga) must have a purpose; fasting (*upavāsa*) is no exception. From the Jaina point of view, intentions are all-important and not activities in themselves. And the consequences of any activity are largely determined by the intentions underlying the activity. That which purifies the soul or by which the soul is purified, is merit (*puṇya*). When pleasure and pain in oneself and in others are due to the limbs (*anga*) of the auspicious kind of disposition (*viśuddhi*) – virtuous (*dharmya*) and pure (*śukla*) kinds of concentration – these are causes of the influx of meritorious karmas (*puṇya*).

The vow of fasting is a supplementary or minor vow, which is a part of the *śikṣā vratas*. For the sake of strengthening the performance of daily meditation (*sāmāyika*), one must undertake fasting twice each lunar fortnight (*proṣadhopavāsa*). Fasting involves abstaining from the pleasures of the five senses and dwelling in the self in deep concentration. The five senses turn away from their pleasures and repose in the self in deep concentration during fasting.

Fasting is also termed as an external austerity (*bāhya tapas*) to promote self-control and discipline, destruction of attachment, destruction of karmas and attainment of meditation and scriptural knowledge. It is not a means for attainment of temporal benefits.

According to Ācārya Kundakunda's Samayasāra (4-8-152):

“Anyone who has not positioned himself in the divine state of the soul, but performs austerities and observes vows, the ‘All-knowing’ (*sarvajña*) calls his austerities and observance of vows as childish austerities (*bālatapas*) and childish observance of vows (*bālavrata*).”

Incidences of prolonged fasting by children are literally *bālatapas* attributable to ignorance, faulty reasoning, spirit of adventure, societal endorsement, over- and misplaced-enthusiasm of family members, or, in plain words, superstition. Blind faith based on traditional values and without the use of power of discrimination leads to superstition. Superstition arises from ignorance and keeps the devotee overwhelmed with expectations or fear, just the opposite of the very purpose of fasting. Such acts can sometimes result into accidents, even death.

Death caused by prolonged fasting by an immature and emergent individual is not to be termed ‘*sallekhanā*’ or ‘*santhārā*’; these terms, particular to Jainism, connote courting voluntary, pious and passionless death **at the end of one's life**.

* Note prepared for the Townhall meeting to discuss “*Upavāsa* by Children in Jain Households”, to be held at Siddhachalam, NJ 07825, United States, on October 23, 2016.

** An independent researcher and Jainism scholar. Based in Dehradun, India, Vijay K. Jain did his graduation in Electronics Engineering from Institute of Technology, Banaras Hindu University, and Post-Graduation in Management from Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad.