

# The Linacre Quarterly

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Volume 71 | Number 1

Article 6

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February 2004

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### Recommended Citation

Maller, Allen S. (2004) "Spiritual Exercise and Physical Health," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 71: No. 1, Article 6.  
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol71/iss1/6>

# Spiritual Exercise and Physical Health

by

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A major challenge to doctors in the 21st century will be "life style diseases." Diabetes is a good example. Diabetes is becoming an epidemic with cases tripling in the last 30 years. The disease can be delayed — perhaps even arrested by simple diet changes, modest weight loss and regular moderate exercise. But even moderate diet and exercise require self-discipline and self-discipline is increasingly challenged in our freedom-loving society.

Doctors are accustomed to curing people, not reforming them. Yet that is what they will find themselves doing more and more in the 21st century. This will bring medicine closer to religion in many ways in the coming decades. Connecting people to religious sources of spiritual self-discipline and helping them apply them to lifestyle self-discipline will help improve peoples' mental and physical health. There are many connections between spiritual health (holiness) and mental/physical well-being.

One of these connections is fasting. Why should people restrict their culinary pleasures? More outrageous, why should we afflict ourselves by fasting? Don't people think that being happy is the most important thing? Yet the Bible decrees a day of fasting (Lev. 16:29, 23:27). For twenty-four hours Jews (in good health) are supposed to afflict their souls by abstaining from eating or drinking anything. What we do not eat may be even more important than what we do eat. All animals eat, but only humans choose to not eat some foods that are both nutritious and tasty. Some people do not eat meat for religious/ethical reasons. Some people do not eat pork for those reasons. And Jews do not eat anything on Yom Kippur — the Day of

Atonement. What is the Bible trying to teach us by decreeing a day of fasting? What spiritual benefits occur when we fast?

First of all, fasting teaches compassion. It is easy to talk about the world's problem of hunger. We can feel sorry that millions of people go to bed hungry each day. But not until one can actually feel it in one's own body is the impact truly there. Compassion based on empathy is much stronger and more consistent than compassion based on pity. This feeling must lead to action. Fasting is never an end in itself; that's why it has so many different outcomes. But all the other outcomes are of no real moral value if compassion is not enlarged and extended through fasting. As the prophet Isaiah said, "The truth is that at the same time you fast, you pursue your own interests and oppress your workers. Your fasting makes you violent, and you quarrel and fight. The kind of fasting I want is this: remove the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, and let the oppressed go free. Share your food with the hungry and open your homes to the homeless poor" (Is. 58: 3-7).

Second, fasting is an exercise in will power. Most people think they can't fast because it's too hard. But actually the discomfort of hunger pangs is relatively minor. A headache, muscle pains from too much exercise, and most certainly a toothache, are all more severe than the pains hunger produces. I have, on occasion, fasted for three days and found that after the first twenty-four hours the pain decreases slightly as the stomach becomes numb. The reason it is so hard to fast is because it is so easy to stop. The food is all around and in easy reach; all you have to do is take a bite. Thus, the key to fasting is the will power to decide again and again not to eat. Our society has increasingly become one of self-indulgence. We lack self-discipline. Fasting goes in direct opposition to our increasing "softness" in life. When people exercise their will power and fast, they are affirming their self-control and celebrating mastery over themselves. We need continually to prove that we can do it, because we are aware of our frequent failures to be self-disciplined.

The third outcome of fasting is improved physical health. Of course, one twenty-four hour fast will not have any more effect than one day of exercise. Only prolonged and regular fasting promotes health. The annual fast on Yom Kippur can, however, awaken us to the importance of "how much and how often we eat." For many years research has shown that when animals are somewhat underfed, receiving a balanced diet at below the normal quantity for maximum physical health, their life spans were prolonged from 50 to 100 percent. With all the additives placed in food these days a reduction of total food intake has to be healthful. More important, since our society has problems with overabundance, fasting provides a good lesson in the virtue of denial. Health problems caused by overeating are the most rapidly growing health problems in affluent



Western countries. A good example is the increasing spread of diabetes. Sixteen million people in the United States have diabetes, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Among residents 40 and older, 16% of Latinos, 13% of African Americans, 8% of Asian Americans and 8% of whites in Los Angeles County have diabetes.

Diabetes can lead to blindness, kidney disease, heart disease, nerve damage, amputations and sometimes death. The prevalence of the disease is related to high rates of obesity and a sedentary lifestyle, which increase the risk of developing the disease. More than half of adults in Los Angeles are overweight and 60% do not get regular exercise. One fifth of all those who are obese will develop diabetes. Thus, going without any food, or even water, for a twenty-four hour period challenges us to think about the benefits of the spiritual teaching: less is more.

Fourth in our list of outcomes, fasting is a positive struggle against our dependencies. We live in a consumer society. We are constantly bombarded by advertising telling us that we must have this or that to be healthy, happy, popular or wise. By fasting we assert that we need not be totally dependent on external things, even such essentials as food. If our most basic need for food and drink can be suspended for twenty-four hours, how much more our needs for all the nonessentials. Judaism doesn't advocate asceticism as an end in itself. In fact it's against Jewish law to deny ourselves normal pleasures. But in our overheated consumer society it is necessary periodically to turn off the constant pressure to consume, and to remind ourselves forcibly that "Man does not live by bread alone" (Deut. 8:3).

Fifth, fasting serves as a penance. Though self-inflicted pain may alleviate some guilt, it is much better to reduce one's guilt by offsetting acts of righteousness to others. This is why contributing to charity is such an important part of Yom Kippur. Indeed, fasting that doesn't increase compassion is ignored by God. Also, the concept of fasting as penance helps us understand that our suffering can be beneficial. Contemporary culture desires happiness above all else. Any suffering is seen as unnecessary and indeed evil. Though we occasionally hear people echo values from the past that suffering can help one grow, or that an existence unalloyed with pain would lack certain qualities of greatness, many today seem to think that the primary goal in life is "always to be happy and free of all discomfort." The satisfaction one derives from the self-induced pain of fasting provides insight into a better way of reacting to the externally caused suffering we have to experience anyway. Taking a pill is not always the best way to alleviate pain especially if by doing so we allay the symptoms without reaching the root cause.

Sixth, fasting is good for the soul. It often serves as an aid for spiritual experiences. For most people, especially those who have not

fasted regularly before, hunger pains are a distraction. People who are not, by nature, spiritual/emotional individuals will probably find that a one-day fast is insufficient to help induce an altered state of consciousness. Those who have fasted regularly on Yom Kippur might like to try a two to three day fast (liquids permitted). It is best to go about your daily activities and devote your late evening or early morning to meditation and prayer. Since you have already fasted for Yom Kippur, the easiest way is to simply extend the fast another thirty-six to forty-eight hours. We are prohibited to fast prior to Yom Kippur; eating a good meal prior to Yom Kippur Eve is a *mitzvah* (religious duty), because Judaism opposes excessive asceticism.

The seventh outcome of fasting is the performance of a *mitzvah*, which is, after all, the one fundamental reason for fasting on Yom Kippur. We do not do *mitzvah* in order to benefit ourselves, but because our duty as Jews requires that we do them. Fasting is a very personal *mitzvah*, with primarily personal consequences. Fasting on Yom Kippur is a personal offering to the God of Israel from each member of the family of Israel. For over 100 generations Jews have fasted on this day. A personal act of fasting is part of the Jewish people's covenant with God. The principal reason to fast is to fulfill a *mitzvah*. The outcome of your fast can be any of a half dozen forms of self-fulfillment. But simply knowing that you have done one of your duties as an adult Jew is the most basic and primary outcome of all.

The understanding that self-fulfillment is better achieved by an emphasis on duty and self-control rather than freedom and self-expression is foreign to most people today. But our bodies and our doctors will increasingly be teaching this lesson in the decades to come. We will soon learn that self-control will be the single biggest factor influencing life expectancy in the 21st century. With self-control most people will have a good chance to live into their 90s and early 100s. However, indulgent pleasure seeking will still cut people's lives short. Almost all religions have always taught this. Fasting and ritual dietary restrictions are the most widespread example of spiritual self-control. The diminution of the external factors causing death will soon make clear to everyone the importance of spiritual factors like self-control in increasing one's life span.

The major factor that raised average life expectancy in the 19th century was the sharp decline in infant mortality. Prior to the 19th century, the infant mortality rate averaged 30-40%. In Sub-Saharan Africa, even today the infant mortality rate is 8-10%. While this is very high by our standards (more than half of all women in these countries have lost a baby), advances in nutrition and public hygiene in the 19th century were largely responsible for the fact that in the Western world today, less than 1% of babies die before their first birthday. In the 20th century the rise in average life expectancy was due to the decline in deaths from external killers like

small pox, pneumonia and polio largely due to immunization and antibodies.

Now that most of the external killers have been diluted or eliminated, it will be up to each one of us to fulfill the prophecy made 26 centuries ago by the prophet Isaiah when he predicted that, "No child shall ever again die as an infant, and no old man shall fail to live out his life. Everyone shall live to a hundred before dying. Whoever falls short of a hundred shall be thought of as cursed" (Is. 65:20). Indeed, if we faithfully exercise self-control and live right, many of us will have a good chance to reach our full potential of 120 (Gen. 6:3).

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