

Fasting and Science (Dr. Constantine Cavarnos)

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According to the Greek Orthodox calendar, the period from the 15th of November till the 24th of December is a fastening period, a time of preparation before the great feast of the Nativity of Christ. During the 12th century the Orthodox church established the Christmas fast as an opportunity for Christians to offer something to God and to come closer to Him by denying themselves some body worldly pleasures and passions.



So in the orthodox religion, Christmas is preceded by a 40 day fast... The main purpose of fasting is to liberate oneself from dependence on the things of this world and strengthen the soul in order to win the sin and temptation and develop love for the Kingdom of God.

But are there any benefits for the health deriving from the abstinence from specific food and drink for a period of time and if yes, which are they? Can it help you get healthier? Scientific evidence showed that there are major health benefits.

FASTING AND SCIENCE

In this study, I will first deal with fasting as a scientific system for maintaining the health of the body and for treating maladies of the body and psyche. Subsequently, I will speak of fasting as a practice of the Ortho-dox Church. I will compare it to scientific fasting with regard to their bases, goals, methods, and consequences.

The subject of fasting is one which, in recent years, has attracted the interest of medical science in many parts of the world, especially in the United States of America, Russia, and Western Europe. In the United States, this interest has spread to the common man, to people of every occupation and social class. Thus, books have been published and articles written not just for scientists, but for the general public. Moreover, discussions on fasting by physicians, physiotherapists, and others have been presented on television and radio. Many books about fasting as a means of improving health and curing diseases have been sold in hundreds of thousands of copies. As examples, we can cite Herbert Shelton's *Fasting Can Save Your Life*, which was first published in Chicago in 1964, and Allan Cott's *Fasting as a Way of Life*, which was first published in 1977 in New York. Shelton, who died in 1985 at the age of eighty-nine, had his own institution in the State of Texas which he directed for more than fifty years. People from all parts of the world went there for therapy. Cott is a psychiatrist. He resides in the city of New York and works as a psychiatrist in one of the hospitals of that city and in private practice. In the hospital, he uses fasting as a therapy for those suffering from psychological illnesses. His book, *Fasting as a Way of Life*, deals with the subject of fasting both from the perspective of bodily health and from the perspective of psychological health. At the end of the book he presents a bibliography which includes more than two hundred contemporary authors and works that deal with the subject of fasting. Also, he presents the addresses and brief descriptions of institutions where fasting is systematically used as a mode of therapy and for the preservation of health.

When Shelton, Cott, and other scientific therapists speak of fasting, they mean total abstinence from food, as well as a total abstinence from drinking, except for water. A person who is fasting eats nothing and, save for water, drinks nothing, until he returns to his regular diet. In general, fasting results in the maintenance and improvement of health and in long life. It prolongs youth, delays the onset of old age, and is conducive to renewed youth. Its beneficial influence is not limited

to the body, but extends also to the psyche. For example, fasting increases the clarity and power of the mind.

One is allowed to drink all of the water that he wishes. However, it must be clean, without any chemical additives such as chlorine or fluorine, free of sugar, and light, that is, without many salts or metallic substances. The best water, which is especially recommended, is distilled water. This contains neither microbes, nor salts, nor other foreign substances. Those who fast are also forbidden to smoke, since cigarette smoke contains harm-ful substances.

This particular kind of fasting, no food intake or abstinence from food, may be used for one, two, or more days, or even for weeks. The period is regulated by the purpose of the fast. The fast should be undertaken with the approval of a physician who is familiar with the practice of fasting, and with his supervision if the fast is longer than one day.

Shelton writes that it is possible to cure innumerable diseases through fasting. Among those which he mentions, in alphabetical order, are the following: anemia, appendicitis, arthritis, asthma, benign tumors of the breast and elsewhere, bronchitis, chronic eczema, colitis, diabetes (when it has not reached the stage of severe organic damage), duodenal and stomach ulcers, dysentery, endocarditis, gastritis, glaucoma, high blood pressure, influenza, kidney and gall bladder stones, migraine headaches, nephritis, pneumonia, prostatitis, paralysis agitans (parkinson's disease), psoriasis, rheumatism, sinusitis, and various heart diseases. Furthermore, Shelton maintains that fasting has the following beneficial consequences: it improves the senses of sight, hearing, smell, and taste. Indeed, in some cases it can restore sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. Fasting improves the functioning of the stomach and the intestines, of the heart, and of other organs. As well, it fortifies the blood: it cleanses the blood and increases the number of red cells. It usually reduces malignant tumors. Fasting reduces the weight of obese individuals faster than any other method and adds to the weight of those who are very thin when, after fasting, they adopt a diet that consists of wholesome, natural foods and drinks.

There are, however, circumstances in which fasting does not help and should not be employed. They are as follows: when a person is very thin; in the advanced stages of diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and tuberculosis. In such instances, one has nothing to gain from fasting.

The physician Allan Cott extols the effectiveness of fasting -of scientific fasting, or abstinence from food- for those who wish to lose weight, who suffer from arthritis,

high blood pressure, elevated, cholesterol levels, or such psychological disorders as schizophrenia. In addition, he recognizes the benefits of this kind of fasting for anemia, asthma, for diseases of the respiratory system, of the skin, of the eyes (iritis, retinitis), of the digestive system, and for diabetes, stomach ulcers, colitis, colds, nervous disorders, gallstones, prostatitis, various forms of rheumatism, and psoriasis. He dissuades the use of fasting, however, in more circumstances than those enumerated by Shelton. Specifically, he does not advise the use of fasting for pregnant women, for women immediately after childbirth, or for children, as well as those suffering from bleeding ulcers, diseases of the blood, brain, or heart - especially when there is a predisposition to thrombosis-, of the kidneys, of the liver, or from cancer. Cott's list reveals that there are differing opinions, among specialists who use fasting as a means of therapy, with regard to those circumstances when fasting of this kind should not be used.

Regarding cancer, because it is a subject in which many are interested today, since this disease has spread greatly, I should note that the physical therapist Bernarr Macfadden, who is one of the first in the twentieth century to give wide publicity to the subject of fasting, had a different view than Cott. Macfadden wrote the important book, *Fasting for Health*, which was published in New York in 1946. In this book, he maintains, like Shelton, that cancerous tumors are reduced with fasting (p. 7). He cites one instance of stomach cancer and another of bone cancer which were completely cured (pp. 193-195).

As a psychiatrist, Cott discusses the use of fasting for the benefit of the psyche and for the treatment of psychological disorders. Cott considers fasting very beneficial and effective. He claims that fasting makes us feel better not only physically, but in spirit also, increases our sensitivity to ethical and spiritual values, enriches the psyche, and produces clarity in the mind and purity in the heart (op. cit., pp. 4,5,9). He dedicates one chapter of his book to the subject of curing psychological diseases. In this chapter, he describes his own successful use of scientific fasting in the treatment of schizophrenia at a New York hospital. He undertook, he reports, the treatment of thirty-five men and women who had been afflicted by schizophrenia at least five years, and who had not benefited from any therapy used on them. He placed them on a fast for twenty-five or more days, with water only. With this fast, twenty-four of the thirty-five became well.

He also cites the results achieved by the Russian physician Yuri Niko-laieff at the Psychiatric Institute of Moscow since 1945. Niko1aieff started with the theory that psychological disorders, especially schizophrenia, can be cured by fasting and by a special diet that must follow the fast. He has prescribed fasting for more than ten

thousand psychologically ill patients. The fast which he uses is of about one month's duration. Nothing is eaten. The fast is stopped when the appetite for food returns, when their tongues and breath are clean, and when the psychological condition of the patient has improved. Afterwards, the patients remain in the hospital for an additional month. During this period, they are placed on a diet which is limited to vegetables, fruits, and a certain kind of slightly sour milk. The sixth or seventh day bread is added. The patients' improvement remains stable for years after, except for those cases in which they add animal products (meat, fish, eggs, cheese, etc.) to this diet. Then a reappearance of the disease is observed. In the other patients, the improvement continues, reaching its zenith two or three months after the termination of their hospitalization.

One might now ask: How does the scientific fast, a complete abstinence from food, bring about an improvement in health and the curing of various diseases? The answer given by those who have studied fasting and who have used it to treat themselves and others is the following: Low levels of health and illnesses grow out of the presence of toxins, of harmful substances in the body, which are due to various causes. These are: overeating, bad diet, the chemical substances in the food which we eat, in medicines, in the water and other liquids which we drink, and in the air which we breathe, as well as the lack of exercise, inadequate rest, and in general an unwholesome way of life. From such toxins we develop various symptoms, to which we give various names and which are called diseases. Our organism, our body, tries to expel these toxins, but does not succeed entirely, and with the passing of years other toxins are continuously added to those already found within the body. This is because every day, throughout the year, we overburden our bodies with excessive amounts of foods, which our organism is struggling to digest and to expel the unused and undigested portions. To accomplish this, a great expenditure of vital body energy is needed. When we stop eating, however, this vital energy, rather than being spent on such activity, is used by the organism to expel the toxins, the poisons, which are deposited in various parts of the body. This process of detoxification, of cleansing the organism, continues as long as we forego food. The toxins are transported, by way of the circulatory system, to the intestines, the kidneys, the lungs, and the skin, and there they are expelled from the body. In proportion to the amount of noxious substances that have been accumulated in the body, a longer or shorter fasting period is needed for its internal cleansing. The time required may be one day, or two or three days. or one. two. three. or more weeks.

The proponents of scientific fasting explain that it is possible for a person to live for such a long time without food, and with water only, because we have within our

bodies energy reserves, in the form of fats, for example, which are utilized for the maintenance and functioning of the body. Consequently, fasting does not mean that one will starve to death. Starvation leads to death, while fasting leads to the restoration and improvement of health.

Regarding fasts of many days duration, the person fasting does not suffer from the desire for food, except in the beginning. This is because the desire for food disappears after the first two or three days of abstinence. When the detoxification process is completed, one's appetite for food returns. Simultaneously, the tongue and breath, heretofore foul, become clean. At that point the fast should be halted. If the desire is not satisfied through food, from this point starvation begins.

During the period of fasting, various mechanisms come into action that work towards detoxification and the cleansing of the body. In reference to this, the famous physician Alexis Carrel says in his book *Man the Unknown*: «Privation of food at first brings about a sensation of hunger, occasionally some nervous stimulation, and later a feeling of weakness. But it also determines certain hidden phenomena which are far more important. The sugar of the liver, the fat of the subcutaneous deposits, are mobilized, and also the proteins of the muscles and the glands. All the organs sacrifice their own substances in order to maintain blood, heart, and brain in a normal condition. Fasting purifies and profoundly modifies our tissues. (*Man the Unknown*. New York, 1938, Chap. 6, p. 229.)

When a person fasts for one or two days, there is no problem as to how he should resume eating. However, when the fast is for a duration of several days, or even weeks, then great caution is required. In the beginning, food portions should be small and limited to fruits and vegetables, or to juices made from them. Afterwards, slowly, other foods can be added. In this, supervision by a physician who is experienced in fasting practices is needed.

In order for us to be always healthy, it is recommended that we make fasting a regular part of our lives, an organic part of our way of life. Doctors and physiotherapists who employ scientific fasting as a means of treatment recommend that every person resolve to fast one day out of the week throughout the year -preferably the same day-, or at least one day a month. On that day, we should eat nothing, but drink only water. This, they point out, should not hinder us from carrying out of our work as on any other days. Many have imposed this regimen on themselves: doctors, lawyers, authors, businessmen, artists, workers, and so on. Many therapists, such as Bernarr Macfadden and Paul Bragg, who have written books on fasting and have attracted many followers, have fasted in this way with fantastic results. Macfadden, at eighty-three years of age, parachuted

from a plane. He has noted that: «Weekly [i.e., one day a week] fasting is indispensable for the assurance of continued vigor and continued vitality for which we all yearn.» He also cites the following saying from the great Greek ethical philosopher, Plutarch: «Instead of using medicines, fast for one day» (Macfadden, *Fasting for Health*, p. 23). Paul Bragg, student and coworker of Macfadden for many years, had imposed the following regimen on himself: he regularly fasted one day of the week all through the year, as well as seven to ten days in addition four times per year. At ninety-five years of age he could climb up and down mountains, run, and swim; he travelled to many parts of the world, where he delivered lectures on health and long life, and wrote books on these subjects. Among the many books which he wrote is the popular work, *The Miracle of Fasting*. Thanks to his way of life, Bragg possessed a robust and indefatigable body and a mind of like characteristics.

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