

# **THE BAHÁ'Í FAST**

**A Study Guide**

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# The Bahá'í Fast

*“As regards fasting, it constitutes, together with the obligatory prayers, the two pillars that sustain the revealed law of God. They act as stimulants to the soul, strengthen, revive and purify it, and thus insure its steady development.”<sup>1</sup>*

Shoghi Effendi

## Why...

Fasting is a spiritual discipline that has been practiced throughout recorded religious history. The specific guidelines for fasting have been defined by the Divine Revealers of religion in accordance with the needs and abilities of the people on whom the ordinance of fasting was binding.

In the Bahá'í Era many previous religious practices have been abrogated, whereas some, such as the law of fasting, have been renewed by the unerring Pen of Bahá'u'lláh. Shoghi Effendi made the following observation on this topic: *“Those unwarranted practices, in connection with the sacrament of baptism, of communion, of confession of sins, of asceticism, of priestly domination, of elaborate ceremonials, of holy war and of polygamy, have one and all been rigidly suppressed by the Pen of Bahá'u'lláh; whilst the rigidity and rigor of certain observances, such as fasting, which are necessary to the devotional life of the individual, have been considerably abated.”<sup>2</sup>*

The Bahá'í Fast is not for the purpose of physically cleansing the body for health reasons, for losing weight, nor, if we are sincere about our spiritual development, is it to be taken lightly as a practice we may observe at our own discretion. It is, rather, fundamentally spiritual in nature, as Bahá'u'lláh has ordained the fast as a spiritual law which is obligatory (binding in law or conscience) on behalf of the believers. From the notes in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas we read about the principle purpose of the fast: “Bahá'u'lláh in one of His Tablets affirms that He has revealed the laws of obligatory prayer and fasting so that through them the believers may draw nigh unto God.”<sup>3</sup>

Concerning the law of fasting Bahá'u'lláh declares: *"We have commanded you to pray and fast from the beginning of maturity; this is ordained by God, you Lord and the Lord of your forefathers."*<sup>4</sup> He further states: *"These are, O my God, the days whereon Thou didst enjoin Thy servants to observe the fast. With it Thou didst adorn the preamble of the Book of Thy Laws revealed unto Thy creatures, and didst deck forth the Repositories of Thy commandments in the sight of all who are in Thy heaven and all who are on Thy earth."*<sup>5</sup>

Regarding the vital character and importance of the Divine ordinances and laws, and the necessity of complete obedience to them by the believers, Bahá'u'lláh clearly states: *"The first duty prescribed by God for His servants is the recognition of Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His laws, Who representeth the Godhead in both the Kingdom of His Cause and the world of creation. Whoso achieveth this duty hath attained unto all good; and whoso is deprived thereof hath gone astray, though he be the author of every righteous deed. It behoveth everyone who reacheth this most sublime station, this summit of transcendent glory, to observe every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world. These twin duties are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other. Thus hath it been decreed by Him Who is the Source of Divine inspiration."*<sup>6</sup>

Again He speaks of the importance of obeying these laws: *"These are the ordinances of God that have been set down in the Books and Tablets by His Most Exalted Pen. Hold ye fast unto His statutes and commandments, and be not of those who, following their idle fancies and vain imaginings, have clung to the standards fixed by their own selves, and cast behind their backs the standards laid down by God. Abstain from food and drink from sunrise to sundown, and beware lest desire deprive you of this grace that is appointed in the Book."*<sup>7</sup>

Other considerations as to why the fast is so important to each one of us may be gleaned from the following verses of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: *"...prayer and fasting is the cause of awakening and mindfulness and conducive to protection and preservation from tests."*<sup>8</sup> *"For this material fast is an outer token of the spiritual fast; it is a symbol of self-restraint, the withholding of oneself from all appetites of the self, taking on the characteristics of the spirit, being carried away by the breathings of heaven and catching fire from the love of God."*<sup>9</sup>

Shoghi Effendi further elaborates on the nature of the fast when he states: *"It (the fasting period) is essentially a period of meditation and prayer, of spiritual recuperation, during which the believer must strive to make the necessary readjustments in his inner life, and to refresh and reinvigorate the spiritual forces latent in his soul. Its significance and purpose are, therefore, fundamentally spiritual in character. Fasting is symbolic, and a reminder of abstinence from selfish and carnal desires."*<sup>10</sup>

Understanding that fasting was not a common practice in the western world, the following reassuring words were written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer: *"It is often difficult for us to do things because they are so very different from what we are used to, not because the thing itself is particularly difficult. With you, and indeed most Bahá'ís, who are now, as adults, accepting this glorious Faith, no doubt some of the ordinances, like fasting and daily prayer, are hard to understand and obey at first. But we must always think that these things are given to all men for a thousand years to come. For Bahá'í children who see these things practiced in the home, they will be as natural and necessary a thing as going to church on Sunday was to the more pious generation of Christians. Bahá'u'lláh would not have given us these things if they would not greatly benefit us, and, like children who are sensible enough to*

*realize their father is wise and does what is good for them, we must accept to obey these ordinances even though at first we may not see any need for them. As we obey them we will gradually come to see in ourselves the benefits they confer.*"<sup>11</sup>

Emphasizing the value of the fast, Bahá'u'lláh reveals the following in a prayer: *"Glory be to Thee, O Lord my God! These are the days whereon Thou hast bidden all men to observe the fast, that through it they may purify their souls and rid themselves of all attachment to any one but Thee, and that out of their hearts may ascend that which will be worthy of the court of Thy majesty and may well beseem the seat of the revelation of Thy oneness."*<sup>12</sup>

Other reasons for fasting may be gleaned from the following talk given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and recorded by Mrs. Corinne True.

*"The Divine wisdom in fasting is manifold. Among them is this: As during those days (i.e. the period of fasting which the followers afterward observe) the Manifestations of the Sun of Reality, through Divine inspiration, is engaged in the descent (reveling) of Verses, the instituting of Divine Law and the arrangement of teachings, through excessive occupation and intensive attraction there remains no condition or time for eating and drinking. For example, when His Holiness Moses went to Mount Tur (Sinai) and there engaged in instituting the Law of God, he fasted forty days. For the purpose of awakening and admonishing the people of Israel, fasting was enjoined upon them.*

*Likewise, His Holiness Christ, in the beginning of instituting the Spiritual Law, the systemizing of the teachings and the arrangement of counsels, for forty days abstained from eating and drinking. In the beginning the disciples and Christians fasted. Later the assemblages of the chief Christians changed fasting into Lenten observances.*

*Likewise the Koran having descended in the month of Ramazan, fasting during that month became a duty.*

*In like manner His Holiness the Supreme (The Báb), in the beginning of the Manifestation through the excessive effects of descending verses, passed days in which His nourishment was reduced to tea only.*

*Likewise, the Blessed Beauty (Bahá'o'lláh), when busy with instituting the Divine Teachings and during the days when the Verses (The Word of God) descended continuously, through the great effect of the Verses and the throbbing of the heart, took no food except the least amount.*

*The purpose is this: In order to follow the Divine Manifestations and for the purpose of admonition and the commemoration of their state, it became incumbent upon the people to fast during those days. For every sincere soul who has a beloved longs to experience that state in which his beloved is. If his beloved is in a state of sorrow, he desires sorrow; if in a state of joy, he desires joy; if in a state of rest, he desires rest; if in a state of trouble, he desires trouble.*

*Now, since in this Millennial Day, his holiness the Supreme (The Báb) fasted many days, and the Blessed Beauty (Bahá'o'lláh) took but little food or drink, it becomes necessary that the friends follow that example...."*<sup>13</sup>

# When...

We are instructed in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas of a specified time for the fast: *“The period of fasting commences with the termination of the Intercalary Days, and ends with the Naw-Rúz Festival.”*<sup>14</sup> Shoghi Effendi further explains through his secretary: *“The fasting period, which lasts nineteen days starting as a rule from the second of March every year and ending on the twentieth of the same month...”*<sup>15</sup>

The fasting period ends at sunset on March 20th with a feast called Naw-Rúz. This feast concludes the end of the Bahá’í year and simultaneously begins a new one, coinciding with the spring equinox. From the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh: *“O Pen of the Most High! Say: O people of the world! We have enjoined upon you fasting during a brief period, and at its close have designated for you Naw-Rúz as a feast.”*<sup>16</sup>

(In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas it is stated that Naw-Rúz should be celebrated on the same day of the spring equinox and therefore may fall on the March 20, 21 or 22. The days of fasting would be the nineteen days prior to that and could begin on March 1, 2 or 3. In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas the Universal House of Justice is left with the decision to set a place on earth for fixing of the times and of the spring equinox. Once this has occurred Bahá’ís will fast according to the actual time of the spring equinox. For now we are instructed to fast from March 2 through March 20.)

The following question was proposed to Bahá’u’lláh regarding fasting at other times: *“Should a person wish to fast at a time other than in the month of Alá, is this permissible or not; and if he hath vowed or pledged himself to such a fast, is this valid and acceptable?”*<sup>17</sup> His answer: *“The ordinance of fasting is such as hath already been revealed. Should someone pledge himself, however, to offer up a fast to God, seeking in this way the fulfilment of a wish, or to realize some other aim, this is permissible, now as heretofore. Howbeit, it is God’s wish, exalted be His glory, that vows and pledges be directed to such objectives as will profit mankind.”*<sup>18</sup>

One may wonder if it is permissible to skip the fast and do it some other month during the year. The Guardian clarified this for us when writing to an individual believer: *“Of course the fast, as you know, can only be kept during the month set aside for that purpose.”*<sup>19</sup>

# How...

What the Bahá'í fast is and how it is carried out is clearly defined by Bahá'u'lláh: *“Abstain from food and drink from sunrise to sundown, and beware lest desire deprive you of this grace that is appointed in the Book.”*<sup>20</sup> “In one of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá’s Tablets He stated that fasting consists of abstinence from food and drink, and further indicates that smoking is a form of “*drink*”. In Arabic the verb “*drink*” applies equally to smoking.”<sup>21</sup>

Shoghi Effendi comments in regards to “*accidental*” eating or drinking during the fast: *“If one eats unconsciously during the fasting hours, this is not breaking the Fast as it is an accident.”*<sup>22</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh has instructed us to fast from sunrise to sunset, yet, in the extreme northern and southern regions of the earth the length of daylight hours vary considerably at this time of year. He counsels us regarding this concern: *“In regions where the days and nights grow long, let times of prayer be gauged by clocks and other instruments that mark the passage of the hours.*

*“This refers to territories situated in the extreme north or south, where the duration of days and nights varies markedly....This provision applies also to fasting.”*<sup>23</sup>

The Universal House of Justice gives us the following guidance regarding how far north or how far south one has to be to utilize this exception: *“It is true that Bahá'u'lláh has ordained in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas that in the high latitudes where the duration of days and nights varies considerably clocks should be relied upon rather than the rising and setting of the sun. However, we feel that Dublin (Ireland) is too far south for the application of this law. You should thus judge the end of each day by the actual sunset.”* The Universal House of Justice wrote to National Spiritual Assembly of Finland: *“As in the case of times for prayer and fasting, believers living in high latitudes are permitted to use the clock rather than the sun in observing those Bahá'í anniversaries with which specific times are associated. The House of Justice leaves it to your Assembly to decide whether this should be applied in Finland and also to fix all detailed matters in connection with it.”*<sup>24</sup> This letter was copied to the National Spiritual Assemblies of Alaska, Canada, Denmark (for Greenland), Iceland, Norway and Sweden. For believers living in these Countries or other Countries of similar latitude you may wish to refer to your National Spiritual Assembly for further guidance to ascertain if you live far enough to the North or the South to make use of the provision to use clocks in determining the beginning and ending of each fast day.

Times for actual sunrise and sunset in your area may be obtained from the weather department of your local television or radio stations. Sunrise and sunset does change a few minutes from year to year in each locality.

In one of Bahá'u'lláh's beautiful prayers for the fast He implies that in addition to abstaining from food and drink during the fast we might also rise before sunrise to pray: *“Thou seest, O God of Mercy, Thou Whose power pervadeth all created things, these servants of Thine, Thy thralls, who, according to the good-pleasure of Thy Will, observe in the daytime the fast prescribed by Thee, who arise, at the earliest dawn of day, to make mention of Thy Name, and to celebrate Thy praise, in the hope of obtaining their share of the goodly things that are treasured up within the treasuries of Thy grace and bounty.”*<sup>25</sup>

# Who...

Those obligated to fast is clearly defined by Bahá'u'lláh in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: *“We have commanded you to pray and fast from the beginning of maturity; this is ordained by God, your Lord and the Lord of your forefathers.”*<sup>26</sup> Concerning the age of maturity mentioned in this verse, He further explains in that same Book: *“The age of maturity is fifteen for both men and women.”*<sup>27</sup> It is, therefore, clear that all Bahá'ís who are fifteen or older are bound by the law of fasting, except those who feel they qualify for one of the exemptions allowed us by Bahá'u'lláh.

## Conditions Which Exempt One From Fasting:

“The Universal House of Justice has clarified that the provisions in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas granting exemptions from certain duties and responsibilities are, as the word indicates, exemptions and not prohibitions. Any believer is, therefore, free to avail himself or herself of an applicable exemption if he or she so wishes. However, the House of Justice counsels that, in deciding whether to do so or not, the believer should use wisdom and realize that Bahá'u'lláh has granted these exemptions for good reason.”<sup>28</sup>

**1. Traveling:** The minimum duration of a journey which exempts the believer from fasting is defined by Bahá'u'lláh: *“The definition of a journey is nine hours by the clock. Should the traveller stop in a place, anticipating that he will stay there for no less than one month by the Bayán reckoning (nineteen days), it is incumbent on him to keep the Fast; but if for less than one month, he is exempt from fasting. If he arriveth during the Fast at a place where he is to stay one month according to the Bayán, he should not observe the Fast till three days have elapsed, thereafter keeping it throughout the remainder of its course; but if he come to his home, where he hath heretofore been permanently resident, he must commence his fast upon the first day after his arrival.”*<sup>29</sup> Concerning the limit of fasting for someone travelling on foot He states: *“The limit is set at two hours. If this is exceeded, it is permissible to break the Fast.”*<sup>30</sup>

“Shoghi Effendi has clarified that while travellers are exempt from fasting, they are free to fast if they so wish. He also indicated that the exemption applies during the whole period of one's travel, not just the hours one is in a train or car, etc.”<sup>31</sup>

**2. Age:** Those believers who have attained the age of seventy do not have to fast. Shoghi Effendi states that *“...if one desires to fast after the age limit is passed, and is strong enough to, one is free to do so.”*<sup>32</sup>

**3. Illness:** *“He hath exempted from this (obligatory prayer and fasting) those who are weak from illness or age, as a bounty from His Presence, and He is the Forgiving, the Generous.”*<sup>33</sup> When questioned regarding fasting and obligatory prayer by the sick, Bahá'u'lláh replied: *“In truth, I say that obligatory prayer and fasting occupy an exalted station in the sight of God. It is, however, in a state of health that their virtue can be realized. In time of ill-health it is not permissible to observe these obligations; such hath been the bidding of the Lord, exalted by His glory, at all times. Blessed be such men and women as pay heed, and observe His precepts. All praise be unto God, He who hath sent down the verses and is the Revealer of undoubted proofs!”*<sup>34</sup>

Shoghi Effendi has noted: *“If during the Fast period a person falls ill and is unable to fast, but recovers before the Fast period is over, he can start to fast again and continue until the end.”*<sup>35</sup>

**4. Pregnancy or Nursing:** Women who are pregnant or nursing are exempt from fasting.

**5. Special Times:** *“God hath exempted women who are in their courses (menstruating) from obligatory prayer and fasting. Let them, instead, after performance of their ablutions, give praise unto God, repeating ninety-five times between the noon of one day and the next ‘Glorified be God, the Lord of Splendour and Beauty’. Thus hath it been decreed in the Book, if ye be of them that comprehend.”*<sup>36</sup>

*“The prescribed ablutions consist of washing the hands and the face in preparation for prayer.”*<sup>37</sup>

**6. Heavy Labor:** Concerning observance of the Fast by people engaged in hard labor during the month of fasting, Bahá'u'lláh has stated: *“Such people are excused from fasting; however, in order to show respect to the law of God and for the exalted station of the Fast, it is most commendable and fitting to eat with frugality and in private.”*<sup>38</sup> “Shoghi Effendi has indicated that the types of work which would exempt people from the Fast will be defined by the Universal House of Justice.”<sup>39</sup>

# Meditations...

1. *“Lauded be Thy name, O my God! This is the hour when Thou hast unlocked the doors of Thy bounty before the faces of Thy creatures, and opened wide the portals of Thy tender mercy unto all the dwellers of Thine earth.”*<sup>40</sup>

2. *“Thou hast endowed every hour of these days with a special virtue, inscrutable to all except Thee, Whose knowledge embraceth all created things. Thou hast, also, assigned unto every soul a portion of this virtue in accordance with the Tablet of Thy decree and the Scriptures of Thine irrevocable judgment.”*<sup>41</sup>

3. *“These are Thy servants, O my Lord, who have entered with Thee in this, the Most Great Prison, who have kept the fast within its walls according to what Thou hadst commanded them in the Tablets of Thy decree and the Books of Thy behest. Send down, therefore, upon them what will thoroughly purge them of all Thou abhorrest, that they may be wholly devoted to Thee, and may detach themselves entirely from all except Thyself.”*<sup>42</sup>

4. *“This is the hour, O my Lord, which Thou hast caused to excel every other hour, and hast related it to the choicest among Thy creatures. I beseech Thee, O my God, by Thy Self and by them, to ordain in the course of this year what shall exalt Thy loved ones.”*<sup>43</sup>

5. *“Grant, O my Lord, that this fast may become a river of life-giving waters and may yield the virtue wherewith Thou hast endowed it.”*<sup>44</sup>

6. *“Grant, O my Lord, that the fire of Thy love and the heat produced by the fast enjoined by Thee may inflame them in Thy Cause, and make them to be occupied with Thy praise and with remembrance of Thee.”*<sup>45</sup>

# WORKSHEET

Take a few minutes to write out an answer to the following questions. When everyone is done, feel free to discuss the answers together.

1. When do Bahá'ís fast? \_\_\_\_\_  
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2. Who is obligated to observe the Bahá'í fast? \_\_\_\_\_  
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3. Why do Bahá'ís fast? \_\_\_\_\_  
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4. List the six provisions that exempt Bahá'ís from fasting? \_\_\_\_\_  
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5. How do Bahá'ís fast? \_\_\_\_\_  
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  - <sup>2</sup> Shoghi Effendi, “The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh”, 2nd rev. ed., (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 22.
  - <sup>3</sup> Bahá’u’lláh, “The Kitáb-i-Aqdas”, (Haifa, Bahá’í World Centre, 1992), Notes, p. 176.
  - <sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 22, #10.
  - <sup>5</sup> Bahá’u’lláh, “Prayers and Meditations”, (Wilmette, Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1971), p. 143.
  - <sup>6</sup> “The Kitáb-i-Aqdas”, p. 19, #1.
  - <sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 25, # 17.
  - <sup>8</sup> Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “Bahá’í World Faith: Selected Writings of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”, (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1956), p. 368.
  - <sup>9</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “Selections from the Writing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”, (Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1978), p. 70.
  - <sup>10</sup> Published in “Bahá’í News, (March 1936), p. 1.
  - <sup>11</sup> From a letter dated 16 March 1949, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, published in “Living the Life: a Compilation”, (London: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 29.
  - <sup>12</sup> “Prayers and Meditations”, p. 79.
  - <sup>13</sup> Table talks by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, by Mrs. Corinne True. Published in “Star of the West”, Vol. IV, No. 18, p. 305.
  - <sup>14</sup> “The Kitáb-i-Aqdas”, p. 148.
  - <sup>15</sup> Published in “Bahá’í News”, (March 1936), p. 1.
  - <sup>16</sup> “The Kitáb-i-Aqdas”, pp. 24-25, #16.
  - <sup>17</sup> Ibid., Questions and Answers, pp. 127-128.
  - <sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 128.
  - <sup>19</sup> Published in “Bahá’í News”, (January 1944), p. 2.
  - <sup>20</sup> “The Kitáb-i-Aqdas”, p. 25, #17.
  - <sup>21</sup> Ibid., Notes, p. 179.
  - <sup>22</sup> Published in “Bahá’í News”, (March 1936), p. 1.
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  - <sup>27</sup> Ibid., Questions and Answers, p. 113.
  - <sup>28</sup> Ibid., Notes, pp. 173-174.
  - <sup>29</sup> Ibid., Questions and Answers, p. 114.
  - <sup>30</sup> Ibid., Questions and Answers, p. 129.
  - <sup>31</sup> Ibid., Notes, p. 179.
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  - <sup>38</sup> Ibid., Questions and Answers, p. 129.
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  - <sup>40</sup> “Prayers and Meditations”, p. 144.
  - <sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 143.
  - <sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 145.
  - <sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 146.
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