Fasting / Asceticism / Feasting

1 Introduction

Fasting is one of the most universal patterns of religious behaviour. From prehistoric shamans to the mystics of our own time, the sensory deprivation provided by a fast has been used to fuel mystical experiences (Espi Forcen and Espi Forcen 2015; Rampling 1986). The most extreme form of this is fasting to the point of death, exploited as a religious exercise (sallekhanā) in the Jain religion (Vallely 2018; The Quint News Staff 2018) and more recently as political blackmail by figures as diverse as Gandhi, whose claim to scriptural support for his practice in the Bhagavad Gītā was somewhat far-fetched (Thomas 1974, 191), nominally religious groups like the Provisional IRA (Yuill 2007), and the purely political – as I write this, the Ukrainian dissident Oleg Sentsov lies dying in a Russian prison hospital after a 100-day hunger strike (France24.com 2018).

Fasting is not the exclusive domain of the religious elite. Various religious traditions have institutionalized a more moderate form of the practice. The most famous of these nowadays is the Muslim fast of Ramadan, which always receives considerable media attention in both Islamic (Christmann 2006) and non-Islamic countries. But fasting has a long history in the Abrahamic faiths. In Christianity, we can trace it all the way to the Apostle Paul (Yinger 2008). Jews, even secular Jews, fast over Yom Kippur (Shoham 2013, 184). The latest member of this group of religions, the Bahá’í Faith, has its own fasting ritual adapted from the Muslim one to fit in with its 19-day months (Bahai.org no date). In Hinduism, the situation is more complicated, some Hindus may fast on specific days of significance to their guru, others may do so only during a specific festival period. In Buddhism we do not find much evidence of institutionalized fasting: the monastic practice of not eating after noon, also followed by especially zealous lay followers during retreats, is not seen in that light.

But fasting has its counterpart, and in the English language we can call it by its cognate term, feasting. Where fasting has been the technique of choice of the solitary mystic, and more occasionally codified into rituals for the masses, feasting has been far more universally adopted. Sometimes the two become intermingled. The feast may precede the fast – Carnival is followed by Lent. Alternatively, the fast may precede the feast: Ramadan is followed by Eid al Fitr, but there have even been criticisms from within the Muslim world that the nightly fast-breaking during Ramadan (al-Iftar) is becoming overly commercialized and is turning the monthly fast of Ramadan into a nightly feast of Ramadan:

In each day of the Ramadan month, thousands of visitors crammed the square before the sunset and waited until the time that daily fasting would be over. After the meals were eaten, shopping
and enjoyment of various cultural activities began. The activities included religious panels addressing different aspects of Ramadan and Islam as well as artistic performances (Sandikci and Omeraki 2007).

Does this dichotomy between religious fasting and feasting echo in our own, more secular time? I believe it does. On the one hand we are told that the developed world is experiencing an epidemic of obesity. This is not a purely western phenomenon, and it does not spare the religious. In 2016, the Bangkok Post reported that nearly half the Buddhist monks in Thailand were dangerously overweight (Charoensuthipan 2016), findings that were quickly echoed around the world (Iyengar 2016; Rosenbaum 2016; Sherwell 2016). At this point, I need to divulge that I underwent a Roux-en-Y gastric bypass some years ago.

On the other hand, we have seen the emergence of eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia. Possibly they have always existed, but they are now common enough, or sufficiently well-recognized, to claim their own category in the DSM-V and ICD-10 (Fairburn and Cooper 2011; Limburg et al. 2018). Long regarded as mainly a female problem, there is now a belated realization that specifically male eating disorders exist and are currently not reflected in these lists (Murray et al. 2017). This male form of the problem focuses on muscularity rather than thinness but can be just as fatal.

These issues (I will not prejudge them by calling them diseases) are embedded in a social context. O’Connor (O’Connor 2000) sees them as reflecting the Protestant worldly asceticism, a fruitless pursuit of perfection demanded by middle-class society, and a search for identity in a world of ever-expanding choices. We have created a world, he argues, in which it is possible not only for anorexia to exist, but in which it can change and mutate to confound us once again:

Once anorexia was trauma-induced: a terrible event – death, divorce, sexual abuse – fed a synergy of self-hate and ascetic escape. Now it seems increasingly trauma-inducing: adolescent risk-taking goes wrong, a trauma tempted comes to be (O’Connor 2000, 8).

Religion is part of this social context. There is some indication that religion may act as a contributing factor (Huline-Dickens 2000; Abraham and Birmingham 2008) to eating disorders, although the evidence is hardly overwhelming, and at times contradictory.¹ It is rather more obvious that westernisation is a powerful factor (Lai 2000). Religion, or at least aspects of religion, has also been used as a tool for recovery (Garrett 1997; Slyter 2012).

We will not deal with fasting as a deliberate religious or political act. What interests us here is not the Jain monk making a deliberate decision to fast unto death, nor with the political prisoner staging a hunger strike. These are issues of suicide, soteri-

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¹ E.g., Joughin et al. 1992 report that religious beliefs increase among anorexics but decrease among bulimics.
ology, and self-sacrifice. The religious professional will be able to determine his or her religion’s theological position on that and respond accordingly. The religiously-sanctioned fast stopping far short of death is also not our concern here. The health implications of these rituals are well-researched (e.g., Myers and Dardas 2017) and religious traditions generally have their own lists of exceptional cases where a fast can be interrupted or deferred. What interests us in the context of Practical Theology, as the term is understood in this volume, is the position of the person who come to the religious professional and confesses that the tension between fasting and feasting has oscillated out of control and has become a life-controlling, and life-threatening, obsession.

A full investigation of the historical development of fasting and feasting in religion such as found in Grimm (Grimm 1996) is beyond the scope of this article. Let us simply stipulate that religious professionals, and religious people generally, will encounter these patterns in daily life and need guidance on how to deal with them. In what follows I will explore possible resources from the Buddhist tradition, but that does not mean that it only applies to Buddhist situations. On the contrary, the intention is to explore how engagement with different ways of thinking about a problem can enrich our ability to deal with social issues regardless of our personal beliefs and affiliations.

The Buddhist approach to the feasting/fasting problem is to recommend the Middle Way between extreme asceticism and extreme indulgence. A balanced lifestyle, as we might say today. This references the Buddha’s own history, in which he experienced extreme indulgence as a prince and extreme asceticism as a wandering ascetic. Enlightenment would not be attained until he renounced both extremes and took up a lifestyle that was still disciplined, but not life-threatening. This has been the blueprint for the Buddhist monastic lifestyle ever since. It is something of a stock Buddhist answer to all existential crises.

It sounds promising, but once we start asking questions it quickly shows it limitations. Where, exactly, are the endpoints, the limiting conditions? In the context of his own time the Buddha was a moderate, but we can hardly extrapolate that position to all times, places and social positions. What would be considered ‘extreme asceticism’ today? Considering the resources now available to the well-off, what would constitute ‘extreme indulgence’? Then, is the Middle Way to be regarded as an exact, computable position precisely in-between these extremes or is it more of a broad area that avoids both but allows considerable vagueness at its own borders?

It is not at all clear that Middle-Way-ism was ever intended to be a universal cure to all human dilemmas. Vernezze (Vernezze 2007), for example demonstrates that the Buddhist approach to anger more closely resembles the Stoic view of Seneca than the Golden Mean of Aristotle. It was explicitly applied to the question of eating. In fact, the Buddha’s decision to abandon self-starvation and adopt a moderate nutritional regime is one of the key moments in the Buddhist mythos. But what does it mean in practice? How can we apply it?
To get a clearer understanding of the Middle Way, we need to stop thinking of it as a static position between two extremes and see how it can act as a dynamic, metamodern (Clasquin-Johnson 2017) movement that oscillates between them while also transcending both. This will require a journey into Indian logic.

Western logic, also known as Aristotelian logic after its great systematizer, holds that there are two distinct logical states, which we can represent as A and not-A. No third possibility exists. We cannot deny that this is an immensely powerful way of looking at reality. Its descendant, Boolean logic, determines the operation of the computer on which I am typing this essay. However, it is not the only way to view reality. Two-value logic assumes the existence of an external world that can be neatly dissected into opposing pairs of values. It does not value the messiness of actual human experience. It forces our perception of an analogue world into a digital pattern.

Indian logic evolved from the study of grammar rather than mathematics. It does not attempt to separate logical relations from epistemology (Matilal, Ganeri, and Tiwari 1998, 14); on the contrary, how we come by valid knowledge is a key question in Indian thought that cannot be separated from how we can manipulate that knowledge. If we were to look at the phenomenon of feasting and fasting from the world of Indian, and specifically Buddhist, logic, the reality of a Middle Way might well become clear.

In Buddhism, there are four logical possibilities. Instead of a dilemma, Buddhism presents us with a tetralemma (Sanskrit: Catuṣkoṭi, literally, “four corners”):

- A
- Not-A
- Both A and Not-A
- Neither A nor Not-A

The first two of these are familiar enough and for our present purposes we can regard them as identical to their equivalents in western logic. The third option can be characterized as the position of ‘it depends’. Is a blade of grass intelligent? It is and it is not. What is the context of the question? Compared to the sand out of which it grows, grass can be seen to send its roots down towards moisture and its leaves towards the light. There is an intelligence of a sort there. But compared to human intelligence, that of a blade of grass is sufficiently minuscule that we can feel justified in saying that grass is not intelligent. It depends. Or, to relate it to the theme of this essay, is the human ability to store excess energy as fat life-threatening? Originally, when we lived as hunter-gatherers, it might have been all that stood between us and death during a harsh winter. But today, that life-enhancing ability has become potentially life-threatening. It depends.

The fourth possibility is best explained in terms of what Ryle (Ryle 1949, 16) calls a “category mistake”. It indicates that the question has been wrongly phrased, that to answer ‘Yes’, ‘No’ or even ‘It depends’ is wrong because the question itself makes no sense. However, Buddhist philosophy does not simply wave it away as an error. By
fully integrating this corner into its system, it acknowledges the human ability to hold mutually contradictory views. Is an anorexia sufferer fat? She is neither fat nor non-fat. She sees herself as overweight despite the emaciated figure staring back at her from the mirror. This is the corner of ‘Not Applicable’ or ‘None of the Above’.

There is no hierarchy among the four corners. No one corner is considered ultimate or even superior to the others. In fact, if we were to ask the question which one is ultimate the answer must be ‘none of the above’ on an even higher level of ‘none-of-the-aboveness’ than before. Ultimacy, enlightenment, nirvana is not a geometrical central point between the corners, it is transcendent to all four, simultaneously the center and the periphery of this four-cornered reality.

Is this way of looking at the world exclusively Buddhist? No. It has its own antecedents as far back as the Rg Veda, for example, the radical skepticism in RV 10.129 where it is said that “Then even nothingness was not, nor existence” and “Then there was neither death nor immortality”. That it was commonly held by non-Buddhist sages in the Buddha’s time is evident in the Brahmajala Sutta:

When questioned about this or that point, he resorts to evasive statements and to endless equivocation: ‘I do not take it thus, nor do I take it in that way, nor do I take it in some other way. I do not say that it is not, nor do I say that it is neither this nor that’ (Bodhi 2010).

We can see similar approaches in the thinking of pre-Socratic (or should that be pre-Aristotelian?) thinkers like Democritus. In our own time, we see fuzzy logic and probability theory as other attempts to broaden the horizons of thought beyond two-value logic.

Within Buddhist Studies, the attention has mostly been on its presence in the thought of Nāgārjuna (e.g., Cotnoir 2018; Hayes 1994), but Nāgārjuna’s task was to use the Catuskoti to destroy itself, leaving only Ultimacy staring us in the face. Our task here is less radical. There is also a philosophical cottage industry that has taken up the task of relating Buddhist logic to western logic (e.g., Ng 1987; Chakravarti 1980; Makino 2014). Again, this is not our concern here. We want to apply the logic of the “four corners” to find a practical, helpful understanding of the Middle Way between fasting and feasting. If we cannot find the extradimensional Ultimacy, perhaps we can at least find, not an exact point, between the four corners, but a broad two-dimensional area where we can understand what the sufferer is going through and reduce the suffering: an unstable, inexact, and philosophically unsatisfying, but humanly helpful Middle Way.

2 Corner 1: Feasting

Somewhat arbitrarily, we will set up feasting rather than fasting as the first corner. Feasting is overindulgence in the classical sense, the gratification of the senses,
and Buddhism has a lot to say about it and advice on avoiding it (and if the reports of obese Thai monks are to be believed, not all that successfully). Overindulgence in sensual pleasure of any kind, including food, is the prime exemplar of craving (Pali: taṇhā). Etymologically, the word taṇhā is derived from the Old Sanskrit tṛṣṇā and therefore related to the English word thirst.

This is such an important concept in Buddhism that it features in the Four Noble Truths as the prime factor in keeping us trapped in unenlightened reality. Three types are distinguished: kama-taṇhā (the craving for sensual pleasure), bhava-taṇhā (the craving for existence) and vibhava-taṇhā (the craving for non-existence).

It is obvious that craving for sensory pleasures is the main issue here. But these three types of craving are not mutually exclusive: sensory pleasure provides evidence that we exist. Craving for pleasure and craving for existence are intertwined.

In the Donapaka Sutta we are told that King Pasenadi of Kosala was used to eating a bucketful of rice at a time. The Buddha told him to have a verse recited to him at every meal.

When a person is constantly mindful,  
And knows when enough food has been taken,  
All their afflictions become more slender,  
They age more gradually, protecting their lives. (Olendzki 2005)

The King gradually reduced his rice intake to no more than a cup-full and was reported to have become quite slim. This may well be the oldest recorded example of a reduced carbohydrate diet in history.

In the Buddhist monastic world, the classical prescription against craving for sensory pleasures (primary sexual desires, but also the pleasures of eating) is to meditate on the body (Pali: paṭikkulamanasikāra), analyzing it into its constituent parts and reflecting on the unpleasantness of each part in isolation (Radich 2007, 154–55). In time, this results in a revulsion with the body’s demands for sensory input. A more extreme version of this practice was the contemplation of the decomposition process of a corpse (Radich 2007, 159–164).

How can this be translated into practical terms? The Buddha did not explicitly tell the king how much rice was permissible. He trusted in the king’s own judgement to determine the correct amount, and simply gave him a daily reminder in the form of a verse. The meditation on the parts of the body does not castigate the practitioner for having desires, it simply advises us to see the body for what it is. The strategy common to both is not to attack the act of feasting itself, not even the craving underlying it, but to let the practitioner get in touch with their own physicality, to trust in his or her own ability to perceive the reality of our physical condition and take the necessary steps to correct it.
3 Corner 2: Fasting

If craving for existence leads to suffering, then so does craving for non-existence. If anything, it is a more subtle form of craving, and here we must find the roots of anorexia. In the Buddhist analysis, this is not merely a response to peer pressure and social norms: it reflects a deep-seated desire not to be, a suicide in slow-motion. Suicide is regarded as an irrational act in Buddhism. “By this I do not mean that it is performed while the balance of the mind is disturbed, but that it is incoherent in the context of Buddhist teachings” (Keown 1996, 30).

However, Buddhism has little concrete to offer here. There is of course the Buddha’s rejection of the extreme asceticism he had practiced in his youth, as discussed above. There are several exhortations to appreciate human life as a rare opportunity to practice meditation and attain enlightenment. But are there specific procedures? We have seen that there are specific meditative techniques to reduce the craving for sense-pleasures for those addicted to them. But there are no forms of meditation specifically designed to increase awareness of the joys of living, especially not where food is concerned. To the Buddha and the early Buddhists, desire for existence and sense-pleasures were more immediate problems than the desire for non-existence. We may wonder if Buddhism itself has strayed from its own Middle Way here.

What we certainly do not find here is any advice to ‘get in touch with your body’. On the contrary, the Buddhist view is that we are excessively obsessed with our bodies, with the way they appear to others, the way they feel after a meal or during a fast. These are data points to be noted, of course. But the Buddhist view is that we need to get at far deeper-rooted tendencies in the mind to find the source of the problem.

4 Corner 3: Both Feasting and Fasting

Before we continue, no, this is not the corner where we will explain bulimia. That would be seen as feasting and fasting (of a sort) in rapid succession, and therefore also the craving for existence and non-existence competing within the person’s awareness.

In this corner we can raise the question, who gets to define feasting and fasting? Is a given meal a feast or a fast? We have already seen this problem when we discussed the Middle Way. Perceptions of feasting change with time and distance. What may seem to be a depressingly non-nutritious and routine-tasting foodstuff to a Western twenty-first century urbanite, say, a slice of white bread with peanut butter, might appear as the pinnacle of decadence to a sixth century BCE Indian peasant. Not, however to the sixth century BCE Indian noble or courtier. On the other hand, amounts of food that would lead to obesity in a sedentary modern person would barely sustain a pre-modern worker who requires the energy to perform long hours of manual labor.
Feasting is about quality as well as quantity, and the perception of both these qualities is socially determined. We can therefore make no hard and fast rule at which point normal intake is “normal”. Our normal may be another’s feast or fast.

Let us recall the Buddha’s encounter with King Pasenadi. Social convention at the time required the king to feast. What triggered the Buddha’s advice? The fact that king Pasenadi was having physical difficulties walking – he is described as “replete and puffing” (Walshe 2007). It was not the feasting, but the result of the feasting that resulted in this text. The king was admonished to develop mindfulness and know from an inner awareness when “enough food has been taken” (Olendzki 2005). After losing weight through reducing his food intake (fasting, compared to what he used to consume) we are told that “on a later occasion King Pasenadi, his body in good shape, stroked his healthy limbs and fervently exclaimed: ‘Truly the Blessed One has doubly shown compassion for my welfare, both in this life and in the life to come!’” (Walshe 2007) While not a feast in any literal sense, metaphorically his fast had resulted in a “feast” of positive sensations.

The lesson here is that we have within us, the wisdom to know when healthy eating has evolved into unhealthy feasting, and perhaps by extension, when it has evolved into unhealthy fasting. We are taught that this mindfulness trumps the social conventions that attempt to define us and our relationship to food. Within this subjectivity we can escape from the social confusion of ‘it depends’ and find our own balance, our own Middle Way. Like King Pasenadi, we can be both fasting and feasting.

5 Corner 4: Neither Feasting nor Fasting

Finally, we reach the fourth possibility, the corner of ‘Not Applicable’. We have already pointed out one application in the self-image of the anorexia sufferer, but there is a further dimension. Here we encounter the phenomena we earlier decided not to focus on: the hunger striker. If we focus on the hunger striker’s relationship to food, we simply miss the point. The hunger striker, or the Jain who is hastening his or her death by refraining from eating, is neither feasting nor fasting. They are doing something completely different, which requires a different analysis and approach.

6 Conclusion

Let us return to the question we posed before: Is there a Middle Way to be found between feasting and fasting? How can we help people caught up in either one, or both? From the discussion above I believe we can isolate some guidelines:

1. Is the problem really food related? If the person is fasting for religious or political purposes, the relationship must occur on that level. Food is a secondary, perhaps even tertiary consideration. The hunger striker has chosen food to make a point,
but it could have been something else. For example, in Buddhism we have seen self-immolation used to bring the world’s attention to the plight of otherwise forgotten people (King 2000; Yang 2011).

2. Which kind of craving is active within the person? In the Buddhist analysis, there will always be craving, unless the person is fully enlightened, in which case he or she would be counselling us! We have seen that three types are distinguished: kama-ṭhā (the craving for sensual pleasure), bhava-ṭhā (the craving for existence) and vibhava-ṭhā (the craving for non-existence). This is not the only valid Buddhist analysis. We could instead have used the “three cankers”, a list that partially overlaps this one:

- Sensual craving (kāmāsavā)
- Craving for existence (bhavāsavā)
- Ignorance (avijjāsavā)

Or we could have used the “three poisons of greed (lobha), hatred (dosa) and delusion (moha). These are different ways of restating the Buddhist message, and some are more popular in some schools of Buddhism than others. Regardless of which one we choose to work with, the underlying theme is that we need to look beneath the surface manifestation and trace the deeply rooted universal patterns in the human psyche, to analyze the problem to its most fundamental form.

3. Now comes the difficult part: empowering the person to find his or her own path. We saw this in the tale of King Pasenadi. The king was a devout Buddhist, and the Buddha could simply have ordered him to eat less. He did not. Instead, he presented a verse that caused the king to look within. The king’s actions followed from that. We each have to find our own way, our own Middle Way between feasting and fasting. All that a religious professional can hope to do is to provide an initial impetus, to kickstart the process. After that, we have to let go.

There is therefore not a Middle Way. There are as many Middle Ways as there are human beings, each one unique. But Buddhism maintains that within ourselves we each have the innate wisdom to find that personal Middle Way. Gurus, holy texts, rituals, meditative exercises, and philosophies can help. I trust, for example that the above discussion has shown how a consideration of other ways of thinking can help us to break out of the shackles of dualistic thinking and take full account of the glorious messiness of our way of experiencing reality. But in the end, we are alone and must find our own Middle Way.

We will fail. That is inevitable for unenlightened beings. But we will try again. Eventually we will find a relatively stable equilibrium, the right Middle Way for that time, that place, and above all, for that person. When time, place or person changes, the process starts all over, but hopefully, with the newly gained insight, the oscillations will be more gentle. Over the years (or lifetimes, if you follow Buddhist ideas on the afterlife) the stabilization will continue, and the Middle Way will reveal itself. It will be the Middle Way of fasting, of feasting, of both fasting and feasting, and of neither fasting nor feasting.
Bibliography


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