



The Bahá'í Fast and TCM

Spring cleaning the body, mind and spirit

Dr. Maryam Mahanian, Dr. TCM

PHOTO: Brian Goldstone

I can get pretty strong feedback from friends when I share with them that I am participating in the Bahá'í fast.

"What?! How can you not eat all day?" "Not even water? That can't be healthy." "Are you sure this is healthy?" "What's Bahá'í?" "I don't know how you do it!"

While I sincerely appreciate their concern for my wellbeing, I reassure them that I will be just fine. I share with them the benefits of the Bahá'í fast and why I choose to fast. The tone of the conversation usually then changes from initial worry and apprehension to genuine excitement about the Fast. Interestingly, some friends have even asked if they could participate in the Fast too!

My family and I are members of an independent world religion The Bahá'í Faith. Every year, in the month of March, adult Bahá'ís embark on a Nineteen Day Fast which concludes on the first day of spring. During the Fast, we abstain from food and drink between sunrise and sunset, roughly eleven to twelve hours per day. The concept of fasting has existed for thousands of years in virtually all world religions and cultures. The primary purpose of the Bahá'í Fast is for spiritual revival and contemplation. It allows for detachment from the physical world, increased empathy for the poor and hungry, gratitude, and material self-discipline and will power.

The following is a quote taken from the Bahá'í writings regarding the Fast:

"Fasting is essentially a period of meditation and prayer, of spiritual recu-

peration, 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."

- Shoghi Effendi

Being a doctor of TCM, I pay particularly close attention to TCM principles of diet and lifestyle to protect my digestion, ensure my Qi and blood do not become depleted, and achieve optimum health. The Bahá'í Faith stipulates moderation in all things, much like TCM. The purpose of the Fast is not to make one ill or further depleted. For this reason, it exempts those who are, for instance, in poor health, pregnant or nursing mothers, women during their menstrual periods, the elderly, and children. Contrary to the public's perception that fasting is quite extreme, the manner in which the Bahá'í Fast is prescribed, much like TCM, is quite sensible and logical. In order to achieve optimum well-being, I attempt for balance and moderation during the Fast.

Here are a few things I consider and my advice as a practitioner to others fasting:

- Drink a warm beverage with breakfast and dinner (I prefer green tea) to warm the middle burner
- Chew food very well and don't rush your meals
- Get sufficient mental and physical rest
- Try to avoid stress.
- Don't overexert yourself with excessive exercise
- Keep warm
- Eat primarily cooked food rather than cold raw foods so that your digestion doesn't need to work harder than it needs to.

- Cut down on strong ingredients such as salt, oil, and harsh spices
- Limit damp and phlegm-producing foods such as dairy, fried foods, and sugar
- Don't overeat in the evenings
- Eat high quality foods
- I often add ginger, garlic, and onions to my dinner in order to warm the middle warmer and aid digestion
- A typical meal that I break the Fast with in the evening is a small piece of animal protein (ie chicken thigh), white rice (rice is very easy to digest), cooked vegetables, and a cup of green tea.

Those with Qi and/or blood deficiency should take extra care of themselves during the Fast being mindful to get sufficient rest and eat adequate nourishing foods before sunrise and after sunset. I recommend a modified 'ba zhen tang' type of nourishing formula leading up to the Fast for a couple weeks and then also every evening during the Fast to support healthy qi and blood.

According to Paul Pitchford in 'Healing with Whole Foods':

"The foods eaten during summer and winter are more extreme. Some people find it beneficial to fast soon after the end of these seasons to make the transition smoother into the more moderate seasons of summer and autumn. Spring fasting, for example, rids the body of the heavy, fatty, and salty foods of winter and prepares it for the activity of summer".

There has been plenty of research into the tremendous physical benefits of fasting: For example, intermittent fasting, which replicates the feast or famine diet of our ancestors, shows that periodically emptying the digestive system allows it to self-cleanse. Fasting gives the digestive system a much needed break. Fasting initiates a healing process in the body; It forces the body to divert energy from the digestive system to the immune system; It increases the efficiency of hormone regulation; It creates more efficient protein production; last but not least it increases physical and mental endurance.



IMAGE SOURCE: <http://www.goodfreephotos.com/places/wisconsin/madison/wisconsin-madison-beginning-of-sunrise.jpg.php>

Bahá'ís look forward to the Fast even though it is not entirely easy for everyone (me included). The Fast often means an empty rumbling tummy, a dry parched mouth and lips, some dips in energy at times, and feeling quite fatigued by the end of the day



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Maryam Mahanian is a registered doctor of TCM. Her private practice in North Vancouver BC focuses on infertility, pregnancy, women's health, skin disorders, and cosmetic acupuncture. When she is not seeing patients, she is trying to keep up with her energetic two children.

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(especially since you have been up before dawn). But these are valuable reminders throughout the day that I am fasting and the positive reasons why. It is remarkable how simply not eating or drinking for twelve hours can powerfully shift my focus. Fasting teaches me patience, unselfishness, willpower, gratitude, empathy, discipline, and moderation. Working on developing these qualities helps me in becoming a more compassionate and focused practitioner.

I find myself more productive mid-day not worrying about food preparation and eating times. It gives me more time to reflect. A slight drop in energy at around noontime is quickly followed by heightened mental clarity and alertness. The lethargic 'spleen overload' you would normally feel after you finish lunch is replaced with increased focus. While working with patients in clinic, I feel more connected to them and more attentive - able to listen to them carefully and wholeheartedly, with greater cognitive clarity. While performing acupuncture, my Qi is surprisingly not depleted but rather more focused and directed.

As a doctor of TCM, I know that part of wellness means staying in balance with the seasons. The spring season is about renewal.

Renewal is one of the most important purposes of the Bahá'í fast.

When the nineteen days of fasting have ended, I have a feeling of accomplishment and new excitement going forward - recharged and ready for spring and the beginning of our new year. The day of the spring equinox which signals the end of the Fast is a Holy Day for Bahá'ís. This is the first day of the new year and is known as Naw-Rúz. It is a time of celebration, of starting the new year spiritually refreshed....and not to mention a time to feast!

Hopefully now that you know a little bit more about the Bahá'í fast, you may be inspired to do some spring cleaning for the body, mind, and spirit yourself. You will be glad you did.

For more information on the Bahá'í faith, go to www.bahai.org

- Maryam Mahanian

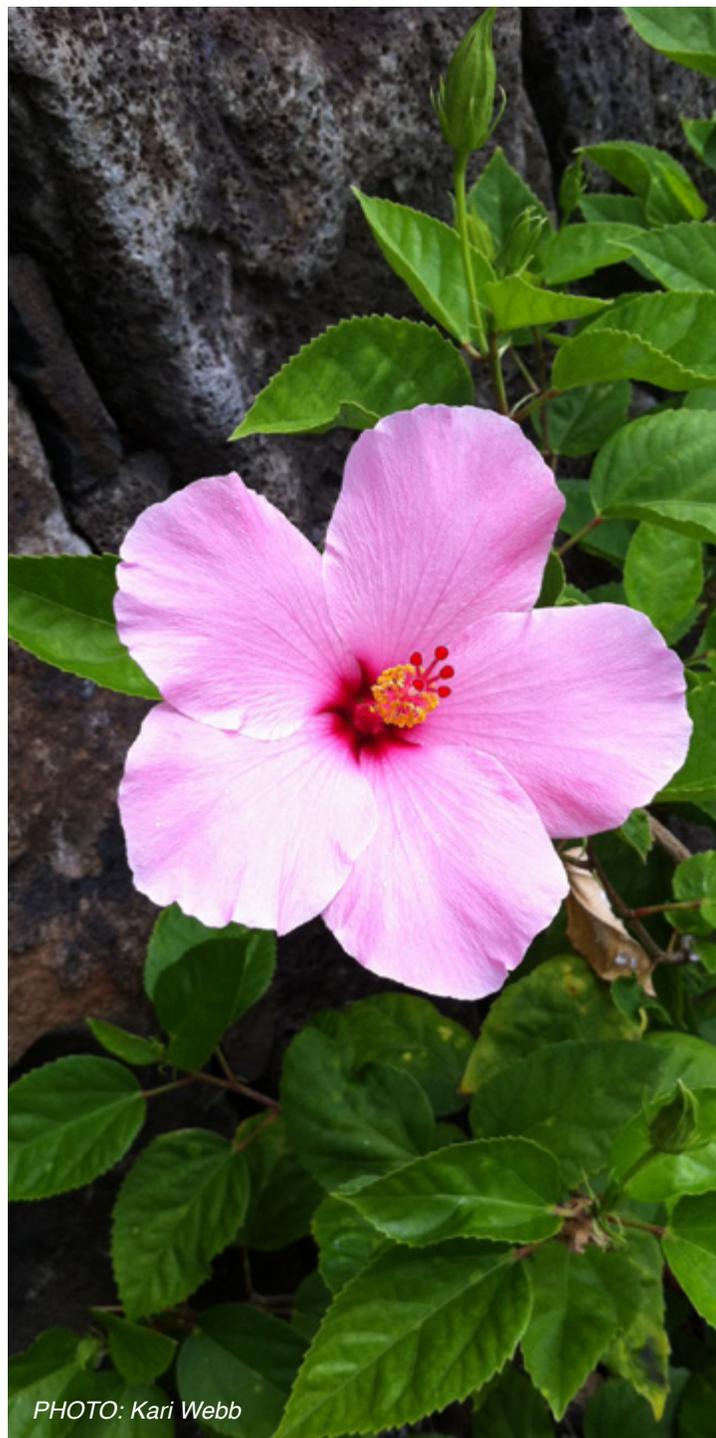


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