
Fasting in Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam: A Comparative Study

Dr. Md. Thowhidul Islam

Associate Professor of Bangladesh Studies, Center for General Education (CGED)

International Islamic University Chittagong, Kumira, Chittagong-4318, Bangladesh

ABSTRACT

Voluntary abstinence from food has been a spiritual purification rite in many religions. Penitence, purification and sacrifice are the major aims. Fasting in Hinduism is the denial of the physical needs of the body for the sake of spiritual gains. Hindus observe a period of fasting during the month of 'Shravan' (July/August), a holy month with religious festivals such as 'Janmastami' (Lord Krishna's birthday) and 'Rakhibandhan' (when sisters tie a 'rakhi' on their brothers). Many Hindus also fast all year round on certain days of week for example, on Monday for Lord Shiva and his wife Goddess Durga. According to Hindu scriptures, fasting helps to create an attunement with the Absolute by establishing a harmonious relationship between the body and the soul. The Buddhist tradition prefers to abstain from eating meat, since this involves the killing of living beings. According to the Buddhist monastic rules, the Vinaya, monks and nuns should have only two meals a day, in the early morning and before noon, and abstain from food for the rest of the day. On festive days, especially at full and new moon, laypeople also follow those rules. There is also some occasional fasting such as the fasting for Lokesvara, which is supposed to cause the birth of a son; fasting for Tara, which frees one from illness and dangers. The Tibetan Buddhist practice of Nyungne (abiding in the fast) has been gaining increased attention. It is two and a half-day practice, which involves the keeping of strict vows, silence and fasting. Fasting the lunar month of Ramadan is one of the five fundamentals of Islam. It has been an obligatory duty ordained by the Almighty Allah for all the adult observant Muslims except who are ill, traveling or pregnant. There are also some other voluntary fasting in Islam. Fasting, in Arabic called Sawm, is abstinence from eating, drinking or sexual activity from sunset to sundown during the month of Ramadan. In Islam, fasting is an important act of worship done for Allah, whereby a Muslim draws closer to his Lord. Because of fasting, the sincerity of faith and devotion to Allah should become all the more evident. The purpose of fasting is to develop God-consciousness (Taqwa),



which can lead to the forth of goodness and virtue in life and hereafter. The learning of self-restrains from fasting is capable enough to lead a purer life in this world as well as to an eternal life of happiness in the next. After having a comprehensive study and finding out the similarities and dissimilarities among the fasting tradition of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, this paper is mainly aimed at proving the highness and glory of fasting system of Islam in gaining its material and spiritual objectives.

Keywords: Fasting, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Spiritual Development.

*Author's email: tauhidcox@iiuc.ac.bd

1. Introduction:

Fasting or Voluntary abstinence from food has been a common spiritual discipline observed in almost all religions. It is an age old aspect of spirituality with a great deal of significance. Penitence, purification, sacrifice and enhancement of knowledge and powers were some of the aims of fasting envisaged by these religions. Even philosophers, scientists and physicians of the past adopted fasting as a healing process needed to recreate health where there was sickness. Fasting in Hinduism is the denial of the physical needs of the body for the sake of spiritual gains. Hindus observe different types of fasting. According to Hindu scriptures, fasting helps to create an attunement with the Absolute by establishing a harmonious relationship between the body and the soul. The Buddhist tradition prefers to abstain from eating meat, since this involves the killing of living beings though fasting has not been considered as a fundamental policy of Buddhism. Fasting the lunar month of *Ramadan* is one of the five fundamentals of Islam. It has been an obligatory duty ordained by the Almighty Allah for all the adult observant Muslims except who are ill, traveling or pregnant. There are also some other voluntary fasting in Islam. Fasting, in Arabic called *Sawm*, is abstinence from eating, drinking or sexual activity from sunset to sundown during the month of *Ramadan*. In Islam, fasting is an important act of worship done for Allah, whereby a Muslim draws closer to his Lord. Because of fasting, the sincerity of faith and devotion to Allah should become all the more evident. The *Qur'ān* also indicates that fasting is a religious practice common to the religions of the past: *O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, in order that you attain Taqwa.*¹ The purpose of fasting is to develop God-consciousness (*Taqwa*), which can lead to the forth of goodness and virtue in life and hereafter. The learning of self-

Fasting in Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam: A Comparative Study

restrains from fasting is capable enough to lead a purer life in this world as well as to an eternal life of happiness in the next. After having a comprehensive study and finding out the similarities and dissimilarities among the fasting tradition of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, this paper is mainly aimed at proving the highness and glory of fasting system of Islam in gaining its material and spiritual objectives.

2. Fasting in Hinduism

Hinduism originated in India and is generally acknowledged to be the world's oldest and third largest religion. Hindus believe that the body is made up of natural elements: earth, air, fire, water, etc. The balance of these elements indicates good health, while an imbalance indicates the opposite. Hindus believe that food affects both body and mind. A proper diet is considered vital for spiritual development in Hinduism. Fasting in Hinduism is the denial of physical needs of the body for the sake of spiritual gains. It involves no intake of food during the fasting time and ends with an evening meal consisting of *sattvic* (pure) foods associated with spiritual well-being. Fasting helps in creating an attunement with the Absolute by establishing a harmonious relationship between the body and the soul.² It counters the tendency of people to be obsessed with worldly indulgences. Fasting in Hindu scriptures is 'Upvaas' (upa= near, vaas= stay). So it literally means to bring one closer to God.

There are basically four types of fasting in Hinduism:

- a) Fasting by Weekdays or Planetary influences
- b) Fasting by Festivals
- c) Fasting by Lunar days
- d) Fasting by waxing and waning moon

a) Fasting by Weekdays or Planetary influences:

Each day in the week is sacred to a particular deity by fasting. Following are the main weekday fasts:

Commonly performed weekday Fasts	
Monday or <i>Somavara</i> fasting for <i>Shiva</i>	Dedicated to <i>Candra</i> , the moon. Fasting is done till evening.
Tuesday or <i>Mangalavara</i> fasting for <i>Ganapati</i>	Dedicated to Mars. It kept for obtaining happiness, gaining respect and if one desires a son. The food cooked with wheat and jiggery (gur) alone should be consumed only once during the whole day.
Wednesday or	Dedicated to Mercury, kept for peace, tranquility, education and

<i>Budhavara</i> fasting for <i>Krishna</i>	success in business. Lord <i>Shanker</i> is worshipped. Green color is significant-wear green clothes and eats green vegetables etc.
Thursday or <i>Brhaspativara</i> for <i>Dattaguru</i>	Dedicated to Jupiter, ruler over education. Lord <i>Vishnu</i> is worshipped. Eat food once and should include Bengal gram (chana dal) and no salt. The yellow color is significant-wear yellow clothes, offer yellow flowers.
Friday or <i>Sukravara</i> for <i>Lakshmi</i>	Dedicated to Venus, kept for prosperity, marriage, and a harmonious family life. Fast till evening and food should include white colored food like rice pudding, milk.
Saturday or <i>Shanivara</i> for <i>Hanuman</i>	Ruled by <i>Shani</i> or Saturn. The God <i>Shani</i> is worshipped. Fast till evening and food without salt. The Lord <i>Hanuman</i> is also worshipped on Saturdays because disciples of Lord <i>Hanuman</i> are never influenced by <i>Shani</i> .
Sunday or <i>Ravivara</i> for <i>Surya</i> - the sun	It is to fulfill all desires particularly to the achievement of victory. Oily and salty food is prohibited. ³

b) Fasting by Festivals:

Fasting is also undertaken on certain festivals. Here are some examples.

Name of Festivals	
<i>Navaratri</i>	The nine-day festival dedicated to <i>Shakti</i> .
<i>Shivaratri</i>	Dedicated to <i>Shiva</i> .
<i>Shasti</i>	Dedicated to Lord <i>Muruga</i> or <i>Kartikeya</i> . There are two <i>Shastis</i> in a Hindu lunar month. One after <i>Amavasya</i> and another after <i>Purnima</i> . Fasting begins with sunrise and is broken on the next day morning after praying to Lord <i>Surya</i> (Sun God). ⁴

c) Fasting by Lunar days:

Annual fasting days are also overlain with the lunar fasting schedule. For example:

Name of Lunar day	
The 14 th day of <i>Magh</i> Jan-February	Some Hindus would not eat food, drink, or sleep for twenty-four hours.
The 9 th day of <i>Cheit</i> March-April	A meal of peas, cakes, bananas, and coconut is the only meal eaten on the day.
the 9 th day of <i>Ashada</i> , July-August	Unmarried girls perform fasts to have good husbands in marriage. This is called <i>Jaya-parvati Vrat</i> because <i>Parvati</i> fasts to win <i>Shiva</i> as her husband.

d) Fasting by waxing and waning moon:

This fasting is based on the different stages of the moon's waxing and waning. There are two phases, the first fifteen days as the moon waxes is known as *Shuklapaksh* or the white fortnight and the next fifteen days as the moon wanes, is known as *Krishnapaksh* black fortnight. On the fifteenth day of *Shuklapaksh* is *Poornima* or full moon and the fifteenth day of *Krishnapaksh* is *Amavasya* or no moon.

Names	
<i>Sankashta Chaturthi</i>	Fasting on the 4 th days of either fortnight. Dedicated to Lord <i>Ganesha</i> .
<i>Asthomi</i>	The 8 th day of each fortnight is <i>Asthomi</i> . Fasting is practiced on special occasions of <i>Asthomi</i> , such as the birthday of <i>Krishna</i> , <i>Asthomi</i> of <i>Krishnapaksh</i> in the month of ' <i>Bhadrapada</i> ' (August-September) known as <i>Janmasthomi</i> or <i>Krishnaashtami</i> , <i>Navaratra Asthomi</i> , in the <i>Shuklapaksh</i> of <i>Ashwini</i> (November-December). Devoted to <i>Devi Durga</i> and <i>Kali</i> .
<i>Naumi</i>	The 9 th day of <i>Chaitra</i> (March-April) is <i>Naumi</i> , the birthday of Lord <i>Rama</i> . <i>Ram-naumi</i> , is very especial-a nine day long fasting.
<i>Ekadasi</i>	<i>Ekadasi</i> refers to the 11 th day of either fortnight, is important for fasting. Vedic scriptures strongly recommend observing a complete fast on the day of <i>Ekadasi</i> . It is believed to destroy sins and purify the mind.
<i>Poornima</i> and <i>Amavasya</i>	<i>Poornima</i> , full moon, and <i>Amavasya</i> , no moon, also popular for fasting. These are recommended for unmarried youths in particular.
<i>Maha Shivaratri</i>	The <i>Amavasya</i> in March, which is noted as the <i>Shiva</i> , consciousness, was married to <i>Parvati</i> , energy.
<i>Vaikuntha Caturdasi</i>	Fasting on the 14 th day of the waxing and waning moon dedicated to <i>Visnu</i> .
<i>Vata Savitri</i>	Married women fast at the time of <i>Purnima</i> of <i>Vata Savitri</i> in <i>Jyestha</i> (June-July), praying for their husbands' longevity. It is said <i>Savitri</i> rescued her husband from the grip of <i>Yama</i> , the lord of death, and brought him back to this world. ⁵

Besides these, on various days different types of fasts are practiced. When one meal is taken in the afternoon is called *Eka Bhukta*. Eating once at night is called *Nakta Vrat*. To fast completely is *Upavas*. There are also different systems of fast depending on local beliefs and sects. *Jams*, for example, will fast for one day, one week, and one month,

until the final *samadhi* occurs. Some Hindus also fast in various ways; depending on the individual such as fast on a single food, eat only wheat/rice/fruit/dairy. The devotee can fast on any day depending on personal choice like for the birth of a child, or achieving prosperity or success in some enterprise.

Justification, Evaluation and Science for Fasting in Hinduism:

In the general practice of Hinduism, fasting is not clearly distinguishable. It is performed under the general concept of *vrata* or spiritual vow. *Vrata* has three main branches. These are *nitya* means permanent, *naimittika* means occasional and *kamya vrata* refers to a vow for what one desires. Many fasts in Hinduism originate from myths propagated by ancient seers to draw ordinary people towards spiritual enlightenment. It is believed to control over one's senses, squelches earthly desires and thus inculcates spiritual growth. Hindus also believe that when there is a spiritual goal behind fasting, it should not make the body weak, irritable. While fasting, utilize the time for contemplation and reading scriptures and when breaking, start with simple food like fruits or milk. Lord Krishna says in *Bhagavad Gita*, "Yoga of meditation is not possible, O Arjuna, for the one who eats too much, or who does not eat at all; who sleeps too much, or who keeps awake." (6.16). Overall perhaps the important point could be summed up as Hinduism generally has some focus on restraining the needs of the body and subjugating the senses to the will and fasting is used as one means towards this.

For Hinduism is intricately woven with two ancient health care *Yoga* and *Ayurveda*. As a form of meditation of yogic power, fasting strengthens the mind, body and soul and makes the mind calm. From the *Ayurvedic* view-point, fasting keeps a person healthy and disease-free. Besides, the doctrine of Hindu astrology also influences the ritual of fasting. Thus the tenets of fasting are devised scientifically.

3. Fasting in Buddhism

Buddhism came into existence in the midst of Hinduism. The ancient religious traditions of early Brahmanism no longer fitted the needs of society. Therefore, many left society to find new religious ways, mostly by practicing asceticism. The *Buddha Siddhartha Gautama* (560 and 480 B.C.) was one of them. He used ascetic practices including strict fast in search for liberation from the suffering of old age. But over time no longer he had the strength to meditate. At that point a young maid offered him a meal which he accepted. He regained his strength and renewed his meditation. So by quitting fasting, and eating in moderation, he realized the central tenet of Buddhist

practice which is moderation. Thus the *Buddha's* spiritual awakening is directly related to fasting. Only when the *Buddha* stopped fasting, he realized his *mahabodhi*, or great awakening. After his 'awakening' (*bodhi*) he formulated his 'middle path' holding the middle between extreme asceticism and indulgence. The core principles of Buddhism are the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. Hence fasting is not considered a core principle of its teachings. Traditionally Buddhism prefers to abstain from eating meat, since this involves the killing of living beings. *Buddha* also suggested that monks and nuns or *bhikkus* should limit their diet after noontime. On festive days, especially at full and new moon, and during meditation laypeople follow those rules too. This is done to attain the ultimate goal of achieving *Nirvana*.⁶

The concepts and practices of Buddhism have got changed with the changes of age and culture. Fasting in the monastic community is considered a '*dhutanga*' practice. *Dhutanga* means to shake up or invigoration. *Dhutangas* are a specific list of thirteen practices, four of which pertain to food: eating once a day, eating at one sitting, reducing the amount of eating, alms-round and eating only the food received at the first seven houses. These practices are not required in the normal course of Buddhism. In the Buddhist practices of the *Newars* in the *Kathmandu* fasting takes a prominent role similar to the Hindus, for example, fasting at full and new moon. On the eighth day after full moon the fasting is held there to honor the *bodhisattva Avalokitesvara-Lokesvara*, the embodiment of compassion. During public or private ceremonial performances fasting is observed to maintain purity. Some examples include the fasting for *Lokesvara*, to cause the birth of a son; a fast for *Tara*, which frees one from illness, dangers, and untimely death; a fast for *Hariti*, protects against smallpox. Fasting is observed on personal wills such as for good jobs, before an exam, or before going on a journey. In different communities fasting is practiced for different lengths of time such as for few days or even few weeks or on definite food like milk or water.⁷ Fasting in the lay community in Asia is typified by the Chinese word '*zhai*' which means vegetarian as well as fasting. The point is that removing the meat from one's diet, twice a month on the new or full moon days, or six times a month, or more often. The principle holds that removing luxuries from diet is already a form of fasting. For monastic, fasting is a difficult practice undertaken with the supervision of a skilled mentor. When a practitioner adopts a supervised fasting practice he or she eats dry bread for three days to prepare the stomach for no food. The standard fasting period is eighteen days and only a small amount of water is drunk daily. Most important is

the ending, which requires small portions of thin porridge or gruel every few hours for three days, until the digestive system has come fully back to life. If this first fast is successful, then one can attempt a thirty-six day fast. Some fasters extend the period gradually up to seventy-two days. This is an extreme practice only recommended to one who has taken all the required steps with the supervision of an experienced mentor. Children rarely fast in any method connected with the Buddhism.⁸

Religious Significance of Fasting in Buddhism:

In Buddhism, fasting is recognized as one of the methods for self-control based on a moral and psychological insight. Sages who practiced self-control began with a system of regulated fasting. The *Buddha's* spiritual awakening is closely linked to fasting. The moment he stopped fasting, realized *Mohabodhi*. His experiment to quit fasting taught him to lead life in moderation. Moderation thus became the central tenet of Buddhist practice. Some Buddhist feel that eating low on the food chain creates merit; eating less luxurious food creates an opportunity to serve the planet and all living beings. Fasting purify their bodies and clarify their thoughts. It allows coarse thoughts to diminish. The Buddha discovered that desire is rooted in the mind and can be transformed in the mind. Fasting can help that process of transforming desire to wisdom by subduing the body's coarse desires.

4. Fasting in Islam

In Islam, fasting (*Sawm, Siyam*) is an important act of worship (*Ibadah*) done for Allah, whereby a Muslim draws closer to his Lord by abandoning food, drink, and sexual intercourse from dawn to sunset. Fasting during the Muslim lunar month of *Ramadan* is one of the five pillars of Islam. The Almighty Allah revealed the Holy *Qur'ān* to the prophet Muhammad (*peace and blessings be upon him*), on the *Layl at-ul Qadr*, or the Night of Destiny, the twenty-seventh night of *Ramadan* (with differences of opinion) in 610 AD. Fasting in Ramadan is obligatory upon every Muslim, male or female, who is adult, sane, healthy, and not traveling, as the *Qur'ān* points out:

“O you who believe, Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that you may learn taqwa- self-restraint. Fasting for] a limited number of days. So whoever among you is ill or on a journey [during them] - then an equal number of days [are to be made up]. And upon those who are able [to fast, but with hardship] - a ransom [as substitute] of feeding a poor person [each day]. And whoever volunteers excess - it is better for him. But to fast is best for you, if you only knew. The month of Ramadhan [is that] in which was revealed the

Fasting in Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam: A Comparative Study

Qur'ān, a guidance for the people and clear proofs of guidance and criterion. So whoever sights [the new moon of] the month, let him fast it; and whoever is ill or on a journey - then an equal number of other days. Allah intends for you ease and does not intend for you hardship and [wants] for you to complete the period and to glorify Allah for that [to] which He has guided you; and perhaps you will be grateful. And when My servants ask you, [O Muhammad], concerning Me - indeed I am near. I respond to the invocation of the supplicant when he calls upon Me. So let them respond to Me [by obedience] and believe in Me that they may be [rightly] guided. It has been made permissible for you the night preceding fasting to go to your wives [for sexual relations]. They are clothing for you and you are clothing for them. Allah knows that you used to deceive yourselves, so He accepted your repentance and forgave you. So now, have relations with them and seek that which Allah has decreed for you. And eat and drink until the white thread of dawn becomes distinct to you from the black thread [of night]. Then complete the fast until the sunset. And do not have relations with them as long as you are staying for worship in the mosques. These are the limits [set by] Allah, so do not approach them. Thus does Allah make clear His ordinances to the people that they may become righteous.⁹

There are also some other fasting as well as atonement for violating our oaths,¹⁰ for killing game during *Hajj*,¹¹ and for estranging spouse.¹² Some people are exempted from fasting during *Ramadan* such as Young Children, People in poor health, pregnant women, Menstruating women, Travelers, if the distance traveled is great. But the travelers and menstruating women are expected to make up the same number of missed days after *Ramadan*. It may be tempting in some cases to just ignore the missed fast or simply feed a poor person to make up. There are also other voluntary fasting besides this mandatory like fasting on Mondays and Thursdays of each week, fasting three days in the middle of the lunar month, and fasting during the day of 'Ashura' and the day of 'Arafah'.

Activities of a Muslim during Fasting in Ramadan

Besides having a fast from dawn to sunset ended with *Iftar* in the evening, special nightly prayers called, *Taraweeh* are held. The entire *Qur'ān* is generally recited in these prayers in the *Mosjids*. They take a meal early in the morning before dawn, known as *suhur*. The performers are specially instructed to see not what displeases Allah, speak no evil, hear no evil, do no evil and look to Allah with fear and hope.

They are also ordained to abstain from lying, backbiting and arguing, as the Prophet Muhammad (*peace and blessings be upon him*) indicated:

“Fasting is not merely abstaining from eating and drinking. Rather, it is also abstaining from ignorant and indecent speech. So if anyone abuses you or behaves ignorantly to you, then say: I am fasting, I am fasting” (Al-Hakim).

It provides an opportunity for the Muslims to be closer to Almighty Allah. The Prophet (*peace and blessings be upon him*) said:

Whoever fasts during Ramadan with faith and seeking his reward from Allah will have his past sins forgiven. Whoever prays during the nights in Ramadan with faith and seeking his reward from Allah will have his past sins forgiven. And he who passes Lailat al-Qadr in prayer with faith and seeking his reward from Allah will have his past sins forgiven (Bukhari, Muslim).

Ramadan ends with a day long celebration known as *Eid-ul-Fitr*. It begins with a special morning prayer with their new or best clothes. A special charity, known as *Zakatul-Fitr* is given out prior to the prayer. The rest of the day is spent in visiting relatives and friends, giving gifts to children and eating.¹³

Objectives of Fasting in Islam:

Since physical benefits of fasting accrue to anyone who fasts, regardless of one's faith, it is obvious that these are not the primary purpose of fasting in Islam. The chief objective of fasting in Islam is to develop *Taqwa*- self-restraint as the *Qur'ān* says: *that you may (learn) self-restraint*. [2:183]. Self-restraint learnt from fasting is capable of strengthening the will to lead a purer life in this world, which in turn will lead to an eternal life of happiness in the next.¹⁴ According to the verses of the Holy *Qur'ān*, three results of fasting in *Ramadan* have been discovered:

- 1) *Taqwa* : learning self-restraint
- 2) *Takbir* : glorifying Allah Almighty because of being guided
- 3) *Shukra* : being grateful.

Taqwa has been translated as self-restraint. Other translations include: God-fearing or God-consciousness. But none of these translations bring out the true root meaning of *Taqwa*. The root of *Taqwa* means to steadfastly remain vigilant in practicing the commands laid down by the Almighty Allah and, because of this, to be protected from all kinds of evil, degenerated actions, and destructive forces which ultimately lead towards building a strong character.¹⁵ Who has developed such a character and which is reflected in his/her action is a *Muttaqi* in the eyes of Allah. Achieving this goal is the

principal objective of fasting in Islam.

Significances and Importance of Fasting in Islam:

Fasting during *Ramadan* is one of the five pillars of Islam. It is considered to be a means of practicing self-control. It is also considered to be a way of experiencing what hunger is all about, sympathizing with the poor and thanking god for everything you have received in life. An important part of *Ramadan* festival is offering gifts in the form of *Zakat*. *Zakat* is one of the pillars of Islam to purify one's wealth by giving a part of it to poor people prescribed by the Holy *Qur'ān*. It is the time for offering intense prayers to god. During fasting time, Muslims try to recite the Holy *Qur'ān*, do voluntary prayers and give charity for virtue. During the last ten days, the Muslims devote in intense prayers and devotion which known as *I'tikaf*. According to the Holy *Qur'ān*, the 27th night (with differences of opinion) of the month of *Ramadan*, known as the *Lailat ul-Qadr* or the Night of Power, is actually considered to be auspicious than any other night. The Muslims spend almost this entire night in prayers. Holy *Qur'ān* says:

*We revealed it in the Night of Destiny. How awesome is the Night of Destiny!
The Night of Destiny is better than a thousand months. The angels and the Spirit
descend therein, by their Lord's leave, to carry out every command. Peaceful it is
until the advent of the dawn.*¹⁶

Fasting provides opportunities to remember Allah alone. It allows them to purify themselves through a kind of sacrifice. It is not an order but rather a great opportunity to run, not walk, along the path of virtue.¹⁷ While there are scientifically proven health benefits, there is the real benefit of enhanced remembrance of Allah throughout the month. Every moment that we submit to Allah's command to refrain from food and drink from dawn to sunset, we are automatically remembering and praising Him consciously and subconsciously. It is a month of self-training, with the hope that this training will last beyond the end of *Ramadan*.¹⁸ If the lessons learned during *Ramadan*, whether in terms of dietary intake or righteousness, are carried on after *Ramadan*, it is for one's entire life.

5. Comparison of Islamic Fasting with Hinduism and Buddhism

Fasting has been practiced in three major religions Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam as a means to purify souls of devotees for God's sake. Hindus practice several types of fasting, while fasting formed a part of the self-mortification in Buddhism.¹⁹ Muslims are supposed to abstain from food, drink and sexual intercourse between sunrise and sunset during the month of *Ramadan* with a view to attain self-retrain. A comparative

study on the fasting in these three religions are discussed in the following table:

Field of comparison	Fasting in Hinduism and Buddhism	Fasting in Islam
Definition	In Hinduism it involves no intake of food during the fasting time, while it is not considered a core principle of Buddhism.	Fasting is the fourth pillar of Islam. In Islam, it is an important act of worship done for Allah, whereby a Muslim draws closer to his Lord by abandoning food, drink, and sexual intercourse from dawn to sunset.
Religious Root	Rooted in the social customs, myths and traditions.	Rooted in the verses of the Holy <i>Qur'ān</i> and sayings of the Prophet (<i>peace and blessings be upon him</i>).
Duration/ Period of time	No specific duration or period of time. It varies from few hours to several weeks.	In Islam all kind of fasting is same in duration from dawn to sunset. Fasting one complete month of <i>Ramadan</i> is mandatory.
For Whom	No specific rule but based on personal intention. Children are excluded.	Obligatory upon every Muslim, male or female, who is adult, sane and healthy. Young Children, unhealthy, pregnant and Menstruating women, and travelers are exempted from fasting during.
Nature	Different types of fasting in Hinduism such as fasting by Weekdays, by Festivals, by Lunar days, by waxing and waning moon. Fasting is considered a <i>dhutanga</i> practice among Buddhists. <i>Dhutangas</i> are a specific list of thirteen practices, four of which pertain to food. These practices are adopted voluntarily as they are not required in the normal course of Buddhism.	The Muslims are supposed to abstain from eating, drinking and sexual intercourse, from dawn to sunset, in the complete lunar month of <i>Ramadan</i> . Fasting except <i>Ramadan</i> is voluntary. There are also some other fasting as for violating oaths, for killing game during Hajj, and for estranging spouse.
Characteristics	Fasting period and nature depend on the will and objective of the performer. For example Full day, three days, even till to one month, no food, only water, only milk etc. It determined by the performer. Complicated in nature and characteristics.	All kind of fasting is same in character as ordained by the Almighty Allah to abstain from eating, drinking and sexual intercourse, from dawn to sunset. Simple and easy in nature and characteristics.

Fasting in Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam: A Comparative Study

Objective	Hinduism says, fasting helps to create an attunement with the Absolute by establishing a harmonious relationship between the body and the soul, while in Buddhism fasting is done to attain the ultimate goal of achieving <i>Nirvana</i> .	The principle Objective of Fasting in Islam is to achieve <i>Taqwaa</i> : learning self-restraint, to steadfastly remain vigilant in practicing the commands of Allah and, because of this, to be protected from all kinds of evil.
Scientific discourse	According to <i>Yoga</i> and <i>Ayurveda</i> fasting strengthens the mind, body and soul and helps to build up discipline and keeps a person healthy and disease-free.	Though fasting has scientifically been proved as beneficial for health for medical reasons including weight management, for rest of the digestive tract and for lowering lipids and others, but the Muslims fast only because of the order of Allah. Islamic fasting is more scientific than that of Hindus and Buddhists.
Effectiveness	It is believed that fasting counters the tendency of people to be obsessed with worldly indulgences, and thus makes the practitioner to obey religious regulations.	Ramadan is a month of self-training, with the hope that this training will last beyond the end of Ramadan. One months teaching and 11 months practice. A month long regular practice is more effective to habituate him with good deeds in other months.
Spirituality	Spirituality is an individual and subjective experience. Buddhist monks and Hindu saints go through much more rigorous rituals like fasting than the Muslims. It does not mean that their spiritual development is of a higher level than the Muslims.	Fasting has to be done collectively at the community level. Unlike a Buddhist monk or a Hindu saint, a Muslim does not have to go to a mountain to develop their spirituality. This shows that a Muslim cannot advocate a spirituality that is based on individual and subjective experience but rather collective. Therefore, in Islam, individual and subjective spiritual development is not the purpose of fasting in the month of <i>Ramadan</i> .
Dedication	It dedicated to various Gods as <i>Shiva</i> , <i>Shakti</i> , <i>Krishna</i> , <i>Hanuman</i> , different planets, <i>Gautama</i> .	Only dedicated to the Almighty Allah
Social Impact	As it depends on personal will, no significant impact on society.	As it is mandatory in the month of Ramadan for all the adult Muslims in the society, the whole society practice together to do good deeds and to abstain from wrong doings which impacts the society at large.

6. Conclusion

Leo Tolstoy writes 'A man who eats too much, cannot strive against laziness, while a gluttonous and idle man will never be able to contend with sexual lust.' Therefore, according to all moral teachings, the effort towards self-control commences with a struggle against the lust of gluttony. Fasting is the best method of self-control. The three major religions Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam are having fasting method with a view to self control and develop spirituality. Hinduism is having no specific rule regarding fasting, while Buddhism does not consider it as a principal element. But Islam clearly explained definite policy of fasting ordained by the Almighty Allah. While fasting is dedicated to many Gods in other religions, it is solely dedicated to the Almighty Allah. While other religion is having no clear objective, Islamic fasting is having absolute goal which is *Taqwa*. A month long fasting is more effective to make a person habituate to do or to abstain from something rather than few days in different months. The nature of fasting in Islam is simple and easy while that of Hinduism and Buddhism is complicated. While Hindu and Buddhist fasting encircle within individual development, Islamic fasting inculcate individual and collective development together. *Ramadan* provides an environment for collective training and development of character. During *Ramadan* the Muslims should abstain not only from food and drinking but also from doing and saying evil too. They are required to emulate and display, year long, the qualities laid down by fasting in the month of *Ramadan*. Since character building is a hard, long, continuous process, *Ramadan* is repeated every year as a reminder and re-enforcer to judge the accomplishments by the standards laid down by fasting. Thus Islamic fasting particularly in the month of *Ramadan*, by any means, is better than fasting culture in any other religions like Hinduism and Buddhism.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 international license.

References & Notes:

-
- ¹ Al-Qur'an, Surah Al-Baqarah, Verse:183, available at <https://quran.com/2?startingVerse=183>.
- ² Diana L. Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.
- ³ Sunita Ramaswamy and Sundar. *Vedic Heritage Teaching Program* (3 Vols.) Saylorsburg, PA: Arsha Vidya Gurukulam.
- ⁴ David J. Mearns, *Shiva's Other Children: Religion and Social Identity amongst Overseas Indians*. Walnut Creek: Sage, 1995.
- ⁵ Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1989.
- ⁶ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- ⁷ Wangchen Rinpoche, *Buddhist Fasting practice*, Snow Lion Publication, New York, 2009.
- ⁸ Reza Shah Kazemi, *Common Ground between Islam and Buddhism*, Fons Vitae, 2010.
- ⁹ Al-Qur'an, Surah Al-Baqarah, Verse:183-187, available at <https://quran.com/2?startingVerse=187>.
- ¹⁰ Al-Qur'an, Surah Mai'dah, Verse: 89, available at <https://quran.com/5?startingVerse=89>.
- ¹¹ Al-Qur'an, Surah Mai'dah, Verse: 95, available at <https://quran.com/5?startingVerse=95>.
- ¹² Al-Qur'an, Surah al-Mujadila, Verse: 4, available at <https://quran.com/58?startingVerse=4>.
- ¹³ Aminah Ibrahim Ali, *The Three Muslim Festivals*, IQRA International Educational Foundation, USA, 1998.
- ¹⁴ Sayyid Abul Ala Mawdudi, *Let us be Muslim*, Edited by Khurram Murad, The Islamic Foundation (UK), Leicester, London, 2003.
- ¹⁵ Imam Al Ghazali, *Inner dimension of Islamic worship*, The Islamic Foundation (UK), Leicester, London, 2004.
- ¹⁶ Al-Qur'an, Surah al-Qadr, Verse: 1-5, available at <https://quran.com/97?startingVerse=1>.
- ¹⁷ Abdul Wahid Hamid, *Islam the natural way*, Muslim Education & Literary Services (MELS), London, 2004.
- ¹⁸ John Ankerberg and John Weldon. *Fast Facts on Islam*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2001.
- ¹⁹ Charles Iliot, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, Vol-1-3, London, 1962.