

STORY #76

Once Lord Buddha conducted an experiment in diet. He began by taking a handful of rice and counting the grains. He then decreased the number of grains he ate each day by one grain. Eventually only one grain remained so he only ate one grain of rice that day. However, one day he fell unconscious from weakness. On that day he decided to take the middle path saying, “If the strings of an instrument are kept too loose, they can’t produce music, and if they’re kept too tight they’ll break. An instrument can only give music when tuned the middle way, neither too loose nor too tight. Similarly the food we eat should be moderate, neither too much nor too little.”

Moderation in diet, *mitahar*, is one of the foundations of spiritual progress. It means to eat the precise amount of food required to keep the body alert and efficient. This isn’t easy. Even a wise man can become a fool when eating. Each meal tests our power of discrimination.

### MY FORTY-DAY FAST

WHEN I WAS ONLY nineteen years old my Reverend Gurudev gave me mantra initiation. I was required to fast solely on water for forty days. To this day, I can’t image how I managed to fast for forty days. I truly believe that I managed only by the grace of my Gurudev. Prior to that time I used to eat two meals and two snacks a day and I would never turn down extra snacks, either.

“From tomorrow onward you should eat only twice a day,” Gurudev told me, giving me preliminary instructions.

I became depressed just hearing this order. My appetite was notorious. Often I would get up in the morning and resolve: “I’ll fast today, for sure!” But the moment I spoke those words my appetite would voraciously attack me and I would eat twice as much breakfast and earlier than usual, as well.

“Guruji,” I pleaded, “How will I ever be able to eat only twice a day?”

But he didn’t change his mind. For the first week I struggled, but then gradually my mind got used to it. For two months I did this and then he changed the routine again.

“After tomorrow, you should eat only once a day and that meal should be moderate.”

“I have to eat moderately and only once a day?” I begged.

“Yes,” he nodded.

The next week was difficult. But then once again my mind got used to the routine. Gurudev insisted that I eat with him and he informed the sister who served us that I must eat moderately. After I ate the moderate portions she had served, Gurudev would order me to leave the table.

Sometimes the sister cried in pity at my situation. Although we were both required to obey, it was obvious that Gurudev’s orders contained no trace of cruelty or oppression. They were full of powerful, tender affection.

Then after keeping me on the dietary regimen of one meal a day, Gurudev instructed that I only drink milk for three months. During the first few days, I felt discomfort again, but afterwards things went fine.

Eventually, Gurudev said,

“My son, starting tomorrow you should fast for forty days and practice mantra japa.”

His first two words, “My son,” were so sweet and had the power to lessen the bitterness of the task ahead.

Expressing my worry in an amusing way, I repeated to Gurudev a traditional saying: “The face of the compassionate Lord doesn’t look upon the hungry person.” Then I added, “But when I fast, He’ll have to look at me because I’m going to chant mantra japa constantly. And before I chant, I’m going to call upon the Lord and demand that He sit with me for forty days.”

“Let the Lord worry about His own helplessness,” Gurudev replied with a smile. “Don’t do His worrying for Him. Since you’ve quoted a traditional saying, I’ll quote to you from scripture: the word upvas or fasting, is composed of two syllables; up meaning

near or close to, and was meaning to reside. That is, to live close to the Lord. Thus, the Lord sits near the fasting devotee who is helpless with love. Actually a devotee is hungry only for love and since the Lord loves to look with unblinking eyes at the face of the love-hungry devotee, He never leaves him alone.”

Finally it was the day of the fast. Guruji initiated me with the mantra and showed me the room where I was to fast.

“You must fast and do mantra japa for forty days,” he said. “There’s a water pot inside. Every day I’ll lock your door from the outside and keep the keys with me. You’re free to come for darshan twice a day.”

“Guruji,” I said, expressing mental anguish and confusion, “Must you bother to lock and unlock the door yourself?”

“Yes,” he said with finality. “I’ll do this myself.”

Such affection for his disciple. What unparalleled grace! I’ve never been proud of my arduous austerities, not even in a dream. It’s all truly due to the divine grace of my Gurudev. He was a great man. I believe he knew me inside and out, and I had unflinching faith in his divine wisdom. I may have had the willpower to fast on water for two or three days, but I know that to fast for forty days was far beyond my capacity.

Thus, on the first day of the fast I bowed to my Gurudev’s feet and humbly said,

“Gurudev, fasting forty days is too hard for me. But with your grace, I’ll try.”

Placing his holy hands on my head he said,

“I bless you,” and I felt an energy transmitted into my body. He also gave me comforting guidance:

“My son,” he said. “The first three days will be difficult for you, but this discomfort will diminish by the fifth day. By the seventh day you’ll have no difficulty at all.”

And that’s what happened. On the fortieth day of the fast, I was still able to walk. Although there was some physical weakness, I experienced physical alertness and mental joy. I also sat regularly for japa.

Gurudev was very loving to me. Even today when I think back, I feel that he loves me most of all. Whenever this thought

comes to me, I lose consciousness. I know for sure that whatever I've received in this world is because of his grace. To me, he is life itself. He means everything to me. By his grace I was able to finish the forty-day fast with no difficulty.

Just as a railroad car can say, "I move only by the grace of the locomotive, only the locomotive has the power to move a railroad car like me." So, too, we move forward by the grace of the guru. Great souls in the past who have experienced the grace of God or Guru have been able to utter only one sentence: "Grace is indescribable."