

The following article was written by John McWhorter in 2007 after he interviewed a number of Australia's leading Yoga authorities on the relationship between yoga and fasting.

John interviewed me after I had just completed a 35 day juice fast around the time of the birth of my son in 2007. Earlier this year I completed a 56 day juice fast. I cannot emphasise enough the value of a properly performed fast or modified fast to your mental and physical health as well as to your yoga practice. However, it is also important to state that you should not attempt any sort of fast unless you have been properly instructed by a respected authority on yoga, physiology, diet and fasting. Any sort of diet especially a fasting diet, including a diet of just fruit and vegetables is potentially dangerous unless it is balanced with a correct breathing practice, which ideally involves a relatively advanced practice of pranayama (breath control) and meditation where the total amount of breathing (minute ventilation) is reduced. We will be presenting more on fasting and diet at a later date. In the mean time a whole chapter of yogic nutrition and the relationship to breathing is in our book 'Applied Anatomy and Physiology of Yoga', which is available for purchase as a downloadable pdf file (2009 edition) or as a hardcopy book (2007 version) at www.anatomy.yogasynergy.com .

John McWhorter is a regular practitioner of YogaSynergy. He is also a yoga teacher and an accomplished writer. Thank you John for letting us publish your article. It is our great pleasure to present it on the YogaSynergy website.

Simon Borg-Olivier (Director YogaSynergy), 16th June 2009

Fasting Meets Yoga

By John McWhorter

Yoga students needn't venture much farther than a gym class to discover the practice's light shines in many directions. But across all the differing traditions housed under the yoga tree, the concept of detachment remains fundamental. Fasting, of any kind, can be a great way to explore such letting go.

We all have our desires but yoga asks us to attenuate them. For some people, that means overcoming the lethargy that keeps us from the mat. Others are challenged to simply sit still. But when it comes to eating, it doesn't matter where you fall on the activity scale. We all eat and for many yoga students, so we can all experiment with *abhyasa* or detachment.

“Eventually fasting or some diet should be addressed by everyone,” said Simon Borg-Olivier, co-director of Sydney’s Yoga Synergy schools. “Fasting gives you a path to understanding. You can start to discover things in your yoga practice you wouldn’t discover otherwise.”

On a practical level, fasting lets the body’s digestive functions rest and reinvigorate. For many of us, digestion is a 24/7 process and just as our minds appreciate a holiday, so too do our internal organs.

On a physical level, going without solid food clears the intestines and allows students to explore yoga postures that aren’t as accessible when the gut is full. On a more subtle level, fasting can markedly increase flexibility and help energy flow better.

But the benefits of fasting are much broader, paving the way toward deeper states of awareness. All the world’s major religions feature some form of fasting. Christians have Lent, Muslims have Ramadan. In the Tantra Yoga lineage, one of the *niyamas* is directly related to food consumption. *Mitahara* translates in various ways as ‘healthy diet’ or ‘moderate diet’ and includes fasting in all its forms. And it’s no surprise, says Susan Schuler, who takes students through a 10-day detox as part of Inspya Yoga’s teacher training.

“When the physical toxins are cleared not only from the body but also the mind-brain, the mind-brain functions significantly improve,” she said. “This enhances and expands our capacity of spiritual realization.”

While spiritual realization is a personal experience and hard to see on the outside, the improvement in physical function is often noticeable in long time yoga students. It’s that inner glow they have, the energy that many of us marvel at that lets them sleep less and do more.

Anyone who’s met Borg-Olivier can attest to his unflagging energy. He sleeps about four hours a day and eats a diet of mostly raw fruit and vegetables. “Giving up food is like walking on fire,” he said. “We get a sense of achievement. When I go without food I feel like I don’t need anything.”

Borg-Olivier recently finished a 35-day juice fast and maintained his natural 60kg, a sign, he said, that his body was conditioned to sustain a regime that might be unhealthy for others.

“Cooking and shopping waste so much time,” he chuckled. “I hardly had to sleep. And I saved \$1000 on food.”

Saving money might be an unexpected benefit of fasting, but Borg-Olivier suggests the desire to explore the practice should develop naturally.

“As soon as yoga is embraced in a passionate way and you begin to enjoy it, then begin to address the diet,” he said. “If yoga feels like a chore, then food can become a reward. And a lot of food works the same way as drugs do. We become addicted to it.”

So how to start? Until you have some experience in fasting, it’s best to start small, says Rami Sivan. In some cultures and traditions, fasting is a regular practice, but for many modern westerners, fasting of any form is rare.

Just giving up a single substance can cause reactions. Regular coffee users know the headaches that can come when they suddenly give up caffeine. And before embarking on a radical program, it doesn’t hurt to talk to a knowledgeable health care practitioner as well as to tune into what your body is saying. People who are already under the care of a doctor should certainly consult them. Others who take on a more strict practice such as going on a fasting retreat would be wise to do so under the supervision of an experienced fast leader.

“Try giving up one meal a week,” Rami Sivan suggested for people who want to start softly. “Then gradually toward one day a month.” In India, he said, fasting is enshrined in the lunar calendar. *Ekadashi* occurs on the 11th day after new and full moons. Then there are devotional fasts for each spiritual tradition. On nearly every day of the week, he said, someone in India is doing *Upavasa*, a practice that translates to ‘dwelling closer.’

“We get closer to the object of our contemplation by considering it,” Rami Sivan said.

Then eventually, there is *Prayopavesh*, Rami Sivan explained. It’s The Great Fast, the one many of us will do at the end of our lives.

“When the body becomes unsuitable for practice and riddled with disease we need to abandon the body. We enter into prayopavesh. We fast to death,” he said.

So perhaps we may as well get some practice along the way?