



Exercising moderation: the Bahá'í teachings

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ABSTRACT

The author explores how Bahá'í principles of naturalness, simplicity and moderation are put into practice.

Followers of the Bahá'í faith believe that, throughout history, humanity carries forward an ever-advancing civilisation guided directly by God. Our Creator's will for us is expressed progressively through the sayings and writings of the great Messengers He sends, known as 'Manifestations of God'. Abraham, Buddha, Moses, Krishna, Zoroaster, Jesus Christ, Muhammad and now, Bahá'u'lláh, are examples of these towering spiritual figures whose teachings have civilised the human race.

At this present time, humanity is moving towards its collective maturity. Rather than setting out hard and fast rules, the guidance brought by Bahá'u'lláh is more inclined to provide general principles and emphasise the responsibility of individuals to live a virtuous life.

The principle of moderation

Unlike other religions, the Bahá'í faith does not generally promote a strict dietary code. Rather, Bahá'í teachings on food and fasting - and their role in living a spiritual life - extol the virtues of naturalness, simplicity and moderation.

The social teachings brought by each Manifestation of God may be different from each other as a result of the particular conditions in which a religion emerges. The Bahá'í teachings, for example, permit the eating of all foods. Since Bahá'u'lláh's message of unity is world-encompassing - open to every possible race, tribe and culture - it may be that too strict a code regulating what people can and can not eat would be impractical to realise universally at this stage.

The use of alcohol, however, is prohibited except for medicinal purposes. Living a simple life, abstaining from the use of alcohol and mind-altering drugs is beneficial to spiritual development, greatly reduces illness and has a good effect on character and conduct.

Eating for good health

The Bahá'í teachings give food a pre-eminent role not only in maintaining health, but also as the preferred means for treating disease. 'Treat disease through diet, by preference, refraining



from the use of drugs,' wrote Bahá'u'lláh, 'and if you find what is required in a single herb, do not resort to a compounded medicament.'

Preserving your own health is given great importance if you are to pursue a life of service to humanity. Moderation is advised in the form of a 'balanced natural diet', without excess, and adapted to climate and the type of work in which the body is engaged.

The Bahá'í writings suggest that human beings, like animals, can instinctively select the foods they need for health – but that their ability to do so is generally obscured by unnatural modes of living, by which is meant ignoring the principle of moderation.

Vegetarianism has been prescribed through the ages as a strategy for achieving both spiritual and material goals. But in the Bahá'í Faith, eating animals is not forbidden. Meat is acknowledged to be a nutritious and sometimes even essential food - for example for rehabilitation of the sick – but nevertheless it is undoubtedly possible to live without meat. Eating meat should be understood within the context of health, as well as ethical and ecological considerations that uphold the value and desirability of vegetarianism.

The notion that the human race is at the threshold of its maturity and is travelling on a collective journey of spiritual progress is reflected in a statement of Bahá'u'lláh's son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá who said the food of the future will be fruit and grains. 'The time will come when meat will no longer be eaten. Medical science is only in its infancy, yet it has shown that our natural food is that which grows out of the ground. The people will gradually develop up to the condition of this natural food.'

Fasting

The Bahá'í fasting period, which lasts nineteen days from the second to the twentieth of March every year, involves complete abstention from food and drink from sunrise till sunset. The fast is binding on Bahá'ís in all countries but it is an individual obligation. It applies to all believers from the age of maturity (15) until 70, with exemptions for travellers (under specified conditions), the sick, women who are pregnant or nursing, women who are menstruating, and those engaged in heavy labour. It is essentially a period of meditation and prayer, of spiritual renewal and reflection.

Bahá'ís are very sociable and hospitable and will often arrange to meet each other at sunset and break their fast with a shared meal together.

From a family perspective the fast period is a blessing. In these days of staggered meal times and an increasing number of families finding quality time together more and more difficult to achieve, the fasting period usually finds the whole family gathered at dawn for prayers and breakfast, and then again at sunset when the fast is ended with prayers, a cup of tea, or several glasses of water, followed by an evening meal. And, having fasted all day, the evening meal is always savoured and appreciated much more than usual! The fasting period not only allows you to reflect spiritually but also to exercise moderation and control in your own eating habits.

Community life

Sharing food together is a universal medium for expressing fellowship. It embodies many values - hospitality, duty, giving, sacrifice and compassion amongst them. Bahá'u'lláh, extolled the importance of hospitality as a means for creating unity. However, as a Bahá'í, you would never presume on the hospitality of others nor let others take undue advantage of your own hospitality.

For every Bahá'í, there is a regular occasion when all the members of the local community - of all ages - meet, pray, consult and eat together. This "feast", as it is known, first appeared in the Bahá'í scriptures as a command to entertain people once every 19 days even if you are



only able to give them water. Bahá'u'lláh explained that the purpose of the gathering was to "bind hearts together" with material means.

Early feasts emphasised hospitality and were purely social occasions. Gradually, though, the meeting became more formalised, combining a meal and the reading of prayers and holy writings. A third element of consulting together about community business was added later.

The type and amount of food provided at a feast is not prescribed but rather tends to reflect local custom and resources. It is the symbolic rather than the material value of the food that is important.

Food is also commonly served at gatherings on Bahá'í holy days - such as the New Year celebration of Naw-Rúz. On such occasions, food is either catered or 'pot-luck' style.

Some of my most memorable Naw-Ruz celebrations have been those where a Baha'í community has hosted a pot luck evening and the vast array of different types of food on offer generally reflects the cultural diversity of the community itself. A lasagne or pasta dish sits quite happily next to a home made stir-fry, a plate of sushi, hummus with pitta bread and feta cheese salad, a lamb biryani, and baguettes with a variety of fillings. And Bahá'ís who live in localities where there are members from a Persian background may have the chance to enjoy the exquisite and subtle flavours of Iran's celebrated cuisine, often consisting of fragrant stews served with perfectly cooked rice, followed by cardamom and rose water pastries and sweet biscuits that delight the palate.

In conclusion, one of the most attractive elements of the Baha'í Faith is seeing how its members, albeit from diverse cultures and backgrounds, are assimilated into the community. As a Baha'í, you don't have to relinquish your heritage or culture. On the contrary, you are encouraged to maintain and share your culture. Diversity, be it in the form of food, costume or customs is something to be celebrated in the Baha'í Faith as a pathway to unity.