

Fasting and the Ethics of Dying: Voluntarily Stopping Eating in India and the Contemporary West

Collaboration Project

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Among Indian Buddhists and Jains, extreme forms of fasting, including fasting to death, were from early on a “bone of contention”. While Jains considered the voluntary abandonment of eating and drinking (*sallekhanā*) to be a non-violent and meritorious death, Indian Buddhists generally saw such extreme forms of fasting as fruitless, if not unmeritorious. In early Buddhist texts, the intentionally ending of one’s life is usually strongly criticized as unwholesome. The collaborative project aims to explore the larger context of the ethics of fasting, including its assumed relevance for health and salvation, in Jainism, Buddhism, and the Hindu traditions across space and time. Relevant aspects include their different positions on the relation of intentionality, action, and retribution, as well as on nourishment, maintenance of the body, and the liberation of the soul. These questions will be explored not only through the study of relevant texts, but also by interviews of contemporary Jains, Buddhists, and Hindus.

In addition, the project will aim to contextualize the recent shift of cultural, religious, legal, and medical implications of the ethics of fasting to death in India and the West. While today certain Indian actors aim to make the Jain practice of fasting to death illegal, a growing number of Western ethical, legal, medical and health care specialists consider, in contrast, the “Voluntarily Stopping Eating and Drinking” (VSED) as a legitimate and widely available option to hasten death. The project will thus explore the recent jurisdiction and the legal-ethical debates on fasting to death (including VSED) in India, European countries, and in North America. The study of a unique pre-modern Indian practice of fasting to death and its contemporary debate can add interesting and relevant aspects to the global discussion on the ethics of dying, which will also be the topic of a workshop in 2022.

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