

Fasting for Perfection

Ekādaśī is the 11th day after the full moon and the new moon. On that day, to fast from grains and beans promotes and protects our spiritual progress. It is one of the Holy Days that are considered the Mother of Devotion. There may be astrological intricacies that sometimes put the Ekādaśī fast to the Dvādaśī, or the 12th day. You can refer to vaisnavacalendar.info. This website lists all festival days and fasts according to your location, as it is astrologically calculated. You can take a subscription with them for email reminders and offer them a donation for their services.

The Ekādaśī fast is followed sunrise to sunrise according to Śrīla Prabhupāda's original instructions to us. It is a day to increase remembrance of Krishna, and it is observed for increasing the strength of devotion.

In his purport to Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam, 9th Canto, chapter 4, text 29, Śrīla Prabhupāda tells us- "To observe Ekādaśī-vrata and Dvādaśī-vrata means to please the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Those interested in advancing in Krishna consciousness must observe Ekādaśī-vrata regularly.

On this day, we simplify our eating for the sake of putting more time and energy to remembering Krishna, and take no grains or beans. All vegetables are fine except for corn, peas, and green beans. There are some pseudo grains that are fine for Ekādaśī, and these include buckwheat, amaranth, and quinoa. Dairy is fine. Ekādaśī prasādam can be a lot of fun to prepare, offer, and enjoy. For me, it was a time to splurge on extra vegetables!

Ekādaśī can be followed as a full fast, but Śrīla Prabhupāda was also very practical. Preaching and service had to go on. When Śrīla Prabhupāda was asked what the Ekādaśī prasādam should be like, he said it should be a feast. He had also instructed fasting and chanting, no other service, and also that since we are not accustomed to fasting, some fruit could be taken. There are practical adjustments,

and the main thing is no grains or beans, simplify material requirements, and increase remembrance of the Supreme Lord, Śrī Krishna. No grains should be prepared on the Ekādaśī day, even for use the next day. Śrīla Prabhupāda was very strict about that. The only exception is where there are installed deities of Viṣṇu or Rādhā and Krishna, and even then, the grain remnants of the offerings may not be honored on that day. Ekādaśī is also a very auspicious day for cleaning, so in the early days, in the Brooklyn Temple on Henry Street, we would do extra cleaning on that day after the morning program, have a sumptuous Ekādaśī feast brunch, and then go out chanting in the streets.

The Story of Ekādaśī

(This article was originally written in 1956 by Śrī Navincandra Cakravarti, a disciple of Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Thākura in 1979 translated into English by Vyenkata dāsa brahmachari.)

This description is from the fourteenth chapter of the Padma Purāṇa, from the section entitled "Kriya-sagara-sara."

Once the great sage Jaimini Ṛṣi said to his spiritual master Śrīla Vyāsadeva, "Oh Gurudeva! Previously, by your mercy, you described to me the history of the glories of the Ganga River, the benefits of worshipping Viṣṇu, the giving of grains in charity, the giving of water in charity, and the magnanimity of drinking the water that has washed the feet of the brāhmaṇas. O best of the sages, Śrī Gurudeva, now, with great enthusiasm, I desire to hear the benefits of fasting on Ekādaśī and the appearance of Ekādaśī. Oh Gurudeva! When did Ekādaśī take birth and from whom did she appear? What are the rules of fasting on the Ekādaśī? Please describe the benefits of following this vow and when it should be followed. Who is the utmost worshipable presiding Deity of Śrī Ekādaśī? What are the faults in not following Ekādaśī properly? Please bestow your mercy upon me and tell about these subjects, as you are the only personality able to do so."

Śrīla Vyāsadeva, upon hearing this enquiry of Jaimini Ṛṣi, became situated in transcendental bliss. “Oh brāhmaṇa sage Jaimini! The results of following Ekādaśī can only be perfectly described by the Supreme Lord, Nārāyaṇa, because Śrī Nārāyaṇa is the only personality capable of describing them in full. But I will give a very brief description in answer to your question.

At the beginning of the material creation, the Supreme Lord created the moving and nonmoving living entities within this world made of five gross material elements. Simultaneously, for the purpose of punishing the human beings, He created a personality whose form was the embodiment of sin (Pāpapurūṣa). The different limbs of this personality were constructed of the various sinful activities. His head was made of the sin of murdering a brāhmaṇa, his two eyes were the form of the sin of drinking intoxicants, his mouth was made of the sin of stealing gold, his ears were the form of the sin of having illicit connection with the spiritual master’s wife, his nose of the sin of killing one’s wife, his arms the form of the sin of killing a cow, his neck made of the sin of stealing accumulated wealth, his chest of the sin of abortion, his lower chest of the sin of having sex with another’s wife, his stomach of the sin of killing one’s relatives, his navel of the sin of killing those who are dependent on him, his waist of the sin of self-appraisal, his thighs of the sin of offending the guru, his genital of the sin of selling one’s daughter, his buttocks of the sin of telling confidential matters, his feet of the sin of killing one’s father, and his hair the form of lesser, less severe sinful activities. In this way, a horrible personality embodying all the sinful activities and vices was created. His bodily color is black, and his eyes are yellow. He inflicts extreme misery upon sinful persons.

The Supreme Personality of Godhead, Lord Viṣṇu, upon seeing this personality of sin, began to think to Himself as follows: ‘I am the creator of the miseries and happiness for the living entities. I am their master because I have created this personality of sin, who gives distress to all dishonest, deceitful, and sinful persons. Now I must create

someone who will control this personality.’ At this time Śrī Bhagavan created the personality known as Yamarāja and the different hellish planetary systems. Those living entities who are very sinful will be sent after death to Yamarāja, who will in turn, according to their sins, send them to a hellish region to suffer.

After these adjustments had been made, the Supreme Lord, who is the giver of distress and happiness to the living entities, went to the house of Yamarāja, with the help of Garuda, the king of birds. When Yamarāja saw that Lord Viṣṇu had arrived, he immediately washed His feet and made an offering unto Him. He then had Him sit upon a golden throne. The Supreme Lord, Viṣṇu, became seated on the throne, whereupon He heard very loud crying sounds coming from the southern direction. He became surprised by this and thus enquired from Yamarāja, ‘From where is this loud crying coming?’

Yamarāja in reply said, ‘Oh Deva! The different living entities of the earthly planetary systems have fallen into the hellish regions. They are suffering extremely for their misdeeds. The horrible crying is because of suffering from the inflictions of their past bad karma (actions).’

After hearing this the Supreme Lord, Viṣṇu, went to the hellish region to the south. When the inhabitants saw who had come they began to cry even louder. The heart of the Supreme Lord, Viṣṇu, became filled with compassion. Lord Viṣṇu thought to Himself, ‘I have created all this progeny, and it is because of Me that they are suffering.’”

Śrīla Vyāsadeva continued: “Oh Jaimini, just listen to what the Supreme Lord did next.

After the merciful Supreme Lord thought over what He had previously considered, He suddenly manifested from His own form the deity of the lunar day Ekādaśī. Afterwards the different sinful living entities began to follow the vow of Ekādaśī and were then elevated quickly to the abode of Vaikuntha. Oh my child Jaimini, therefore the lunar day of Ekādaśī is the selfsame form of the Supreme

Lord, Viṣṇu, and the Supersoul within the heart of the living entities. Śrī Ekādaśī is the utmost pious activity and is situated as the head among all vows.

Following the ascension of Śrī Ekādaśī, that personality who is the form of the sinful activity gradually saw the influence she had. He approached Lord Viṣṇu with doubts in his heart and began offering many prayers, whereupon Lord Viṣṇu became very pleased and said, “I have become very pleased by your nice offerings. What boon is it that you want?”

The Pāpapurūṣa replied, “I am your created progeny, and it is through me that you wanted distress given to the living entities who are very sinful. But now, by the influence of Śrī Ekādaśī, I have become all but destroyed. Oh Prabhu! After I die all of Your parts and parcels who have accepted material bodies will become liberated and therefore return to the abode of Vaikuntha. If this liberation of all living entities takes place, then who will carry on Your activities? There will be no one to enact the pastimes in the earthly planetary systems! Oh Keshava! If You want these eternal pastimes to carry on, then You please save me from the fear of Ekādaśī. No type of pious activity can bind me. But Ekādaśī only, being Your own manifested form, can impede me. Out of fear of Śrī Ekādaśī I have fled and taken shelter of men; animals; insects; hills; trees; moving and nonmoving living entities; rivers; oceans; forests; heavenly, earthly, and hellish planetary systems; demigods; and the Gandarvas. I cannot find a place where I can be free from fear of Śrī Ekādaśī. Oh my Master! I am a product of Your creation, so therefore very mercifully direct me to a place where I can reside fearlessly.”

Śrīla Vyāsadeva then said to Jaimini, “After saying this, the embodiment of all sinful activities (Pāpapurūṣa) fell down at the feet of the Supreme Lord, Viṣṇu, who is the destroyer of all miseries and began to cry.

After this, Lord Viṣṇu, observing the condition of the Pāpapurūṣa with laughter, began to speak thus: ‘Oh Pāpapurūṣa! Rise up! Don’t lament any longer. Just listen, and I’ll tell you where you can

stay on the auspicious lunar day of Ekādaśī. On the day of Ekādaśī, which is the benefactor of the three worlds, you can take shelter of foodstuff in the form of grains. There is no reason to worry about this anymore, because My form as Śrī Ekādaśī Devī will no longer impede you.’ After giving direction to the Pāpapurūṣa, the Supreme Lord, Viṣṇu, disappeared and the Pāpapurūṣa returned to the performance of his own activities.

Therefore those persons who are serious about the ultimate benefit for the soul will never eat grains on the Ekādaśī tithi. According to the instructions of Lord Viṣṇu, every kind of sinful activity that can be found in the material world takes its residence in this place of foodstuff (grain). Whoever follows Ekādaśī is freed from all sins and never enters into hellish regions. If one doesn’t follow Ekadashi because of illusion, he is still considered the utmost sinner. For every mouthful of grain that is eaten by a resident of the earthly region, one receives the effect of killing millions of brāhmaṇas. It is definitely necessary that one give up eating grains on Ekādaśī. I very strongly say again and again, ‘On Ekadashi, don’t eat grains, don’t eat grains, don’t eat grains!’ Whether one be a kṣatriya, vaiśya, śūdra, or of any family, he should follow the lunar day of Ekādaśī. From this the perfection of varṇa and ashram will be attained. Especially since even if one by trickery follows Ekādaśī, all of his sins become destroyed and he very easily attains the supreme goal, the abode of Vaikuntha.”

One day Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu fell down at the feet of His mother and requested her to give Him one thing in charity. This is verse 8 in the 15th chapter of Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Ādi-līlā.

The following verse is- His mother replied, “My dear son, I will give You whatever You ask.” Then the Lord said, “My dear mother, please do not eat grains on the Ekādaśī day.”

In the purport to that verse, Śrīla Prabhupāda explains-

From the very beginning of His childhood life Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu introduced the system

of observing a fast on the Ekādaśī day. In the Bhakti-sandarbhā, by Śrīla Jīva Gosvāmī, there is a quotation from the Skanda Purāṇa admonishing that a person who eats grains on Ekādaśī becomes a murderer of his mother, father, brother and spiritual master, and even if he is elevated to a Vaikuṅṭha planet, he falls down. On Ekādaśī, everything is cooked for Viṣṇu, including regular grains and dhal, but it is enjoined that a Vaiṣṇava should not even take Viṣṇu-prasādam on Ekādaśī. It is said that a Vaiṣṇava does not accept anything eatable that is not offered to Lord Viṣṇu, but on Ekādaśī a Vaiṣṇava should not touch even mahā-prasādam offered to Viṣṇu, although such prasādam may be kept for being eaten the next day. It is strictly forbidden for one to accept any kind of grain on Ekādaśī, even if it is offered to Lord Viṣṇu.

Mother Śacī said, “You have spoken very nicely. I shall not eat grains on Ekādaśī.” From that day, she began to observe fasting on Ekādaśī. This is verse 10, Caitanya-caritāmṛta Ādi-līlā chapter 15.

Chapter 7 of The Nectar of Devotion tells us-

In the Brahma-vaivarta Purāṇa it is said that one who observes fasting on Ekādaśī is freed from all kinds of reactions to sinful activities and advances in pious life. The basic principle is not just to fast but to increase one’s faith and love for Govinda, or Krishna. The real reason for observing fasting on Ekādaśī is to minimize the demands of the body and to engage our time in the service of the Lord by chanting or performing similar service. The best thing to do on fasting days is to remember the pastimes of Govinda and to hear His Holy Name constantly.

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