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## JAIN UPVAS (FASTING): ANCIENT WISDOM FOR MODERN METABOLIC HEALTH

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### Abstract

We live in an era marked by unprecedented rates of obesity and metabolic disorders, largely driven by sedentary lifestyles, excessive caloric intake, and processed food consumption. As modern medicine grapples with the rising prevalence of conditions such as type 2 diabetes, metabolic syndrome, and cardiovascular diseases, there is growing interest in traditional dietary practices that may offer holistic solutions. Jain *Upvas* (fasting), a time-honoured spiritual and health practice, has been followed for centuries as a means of self-discipline and purification. Recent scientific studies on intermittent fasting and caloric restriction suggest that such practices can significantly improve metabolic health, enhance insulin sensitivity, and promote cellular repair through autophagy (Longo & Mattson, 2014).

This article explores the principles of Jain fasting, its historical and spiritual significance, and its potential alignment with modern metabolic health research. Through extensive analysis of traditional Jain texts, contemporary scientific literature, and comparative medical studies, this research establishes significant correlations between traditional Jain fasting practices and current therapeutic approaches to metabolic health. The study demonstrates how the holistic Jain approach to fasting, encompassing physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions, offers valuable insights for developing integrated solutions to modern metabolic disorders. The findings of the author suggest that incorporating modified versions of Jain fasting principles into contemporary healthcare protocols could enhance treatment outcomes while promoting sustainable lifestyle changes.

**Keywords:** Jaina Upvas, Metabolic Health, Obesity, Intermittent Fasting, Traditional Medicine, Preventive Healthcare, Holistic Health, Dietary Intervention, Mind-Body Medicine, Religious Fasting, Weight Management.

### Introduction

The global healthcare system faces an unprecedented challenge, with metabolic disorders reaching epidemic proportions. The World Health Organization reports that obesity rates have nearly tripled since 1975, with over 1.9 billion adults classified as overweight and 650 million as obese.<sup>1</sup> This alarming trend has led to a surge in metabolic diseases such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disorders, and non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, placing immense strain on healthcare systems worldwide. In response, researchers have begun exploring diverse approaches to treatment and prevention, including ancient wisdom traditions that emphasize dietary discipline and fasting. One such tradition is *Upvas* (fasting) in Jainism, a practice deeply rooted in spiritual discipline and self-restraint. While traditionally undertaken for religious and ethical purposes, modern scientific research suggests that periodic fasting can offer significant metabolic benefits, including improved insulin sensitivity, enhanced fat metabolism, and cellular regeneration through autophagy.<sup>2</sup> This article examines Jain *Upvas* in the context of contemporary metabolic health research, exploring its potential as a natural and holistic strategy for combating obesity and related disorders. The study aims to bridge the gap between ancient wisdom and modern science, offering insights for developing more effective and sustainable approaches to metabolic health management.

### Understanding Jain Upvas

The traditions of Jain *Upvas* (fasting) trace their origins to ancient India, with systematic documentation in texts dating back to the 6th century BCE. Jainism, as one of the oldest ascetic traditions, places great emphasis on *tapas* (austerity), of which fasting is a fundamental component.<sup>3</sup> The evolution of *Upvas* spans several distinct historical periods, each contributing to its development while maintaining core principles.

During the *pre-classical period* (before 500 BCE), fasting practices were primarily transmitted through oral tradition, as early Jain monks adhered to rigorous ascetic disciplines based on renunciation and self-purification (Jaini, 1998). The early Jain scriptures, such as the *Acārāṅga Sūtra* and *Sūtrakṛtāṅga Sūtra*, mention fasting as a means of spiritual liberation, emphasizing non-attachment to bodily needs.<sup>4</sup>



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The **classical period** (500 BCE–500 CE) marked the systematic codification of Jain fasting practices in authoritative texts. The *Tattvārtha Sūtra* (c. 2nd–5th century CE), composed by Umasvati, provided a structured philosophical framework for Jain ethics, including fasting as a means of controlling desires and attaining *moksha*. This era also saw the distinction between voluntary fasting (*sallekhana* or ritual death) and periodic fasting (*Upvas*), allowing lay practitioners to engage in fasting while leading household lives.

In the **medieval period** (500–1500 CE), Jain fasting practices evolved further as the religion spread across different regions of India. Variations of fasting, such as *Varsitap* (alternate day fasting for a year) and *Ayambil* (restricted diet fasting), became more structured and adapted to specific Jain communities. The medieval period also saw an increasing emphasis on *Pratikramana* (ritual reflection), which often accompanied fasting as a means of self-discipline and atonement.<sup>5</sup>

The **modern period** (1500 CE–present) has witnessed the adaptation of Jain fasting practices to contemporary lifestyles. While maintaining its spiritual essence, *Upvas* has gained recognition for its health benefits, aligning with modern scientific understandings of fasting-induced metabolic regulation. Many contemporary Jains observe fasting during sacred events such as *Paryushana* and *Mahavir Jayanti*, while some have also adopted intermittent fasting as a wellness practice.<sup>6</sup> Despite evolving through history, Jain fasting has remained a cornerstone of spiritual discipline, embodying principles of self-control, minimalism, and ethical living. Its intersection with modern health science suggests that ancient fasting traditions may hold valuable insights for contemporary metabolic health.

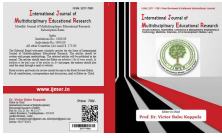
## Principles and Types of Upvas

### Principles of Upvas

At the heart of Jain fasting (*Upvas*) lies the principle of Ahimsa (non-violence), which is the foundation of Jain ethics. Ahimsa extends beyond the physical act of avoiding harm to others; it also includes non-violence toward oneself, emphasizing a balanced approach to physical and spiritual well-being.<sup>7</sup> The *Ācārāṅga Sūtra*, one of the oldest Jain scriptures, highlights fasting as a means of self-restraint and purification, stating that renouncing excessive indulgence leads to the calming of passions and the weakening of karmic bondage (*Ācārāṅga Sūtra* 1.2.3). By voluntarily abstaining from food, practitioners aim to purify both the body and mind, cultivating inner harmony and detachment from material cravings. Another key principle of *Upvas* is its alignment with Samyak Charitra (right conduct), one of the three essential pillars of Jain philosophy along with Samyak Darshan (right faith) and Samyak Jnana (right knowledge).<sup>8</sup> The *Dasavaikalika Sūtra* (6.11) emphasizes the role of fasting in cultivating self-control, discipline, and mental clarity, guiding practitioners toward a life of equanimity and ethical purity. Through fasting, Jains practice Aparigraha (non-possessiveness), reducing attachment to sensory pleasures and worldly indulgences.

A central spiritual objective of fasting is Nirjara, the process of shedding accumulated karmas. According to Jain karmic theory, every action—whether physical, verbal, or mental—leads to the accumulation of karma, which binds the soul to the cycle of birth and rebirth (*samsara*).<sup>9</sup> The *Tattvārtha Sūtra* (9.3) explicitly states that austerities such as fasting aid in burning past karmas, bringing the soul closer to liberation (*Moksha*). Advanced fasting practices, such as *Sallekhana* (ritual fasting unto death), are described in the *Uttarādhyayana Sūtra* as the ultimate form of detachment, where the practitioner transcends physical needs to attain a state of spiritual liberation (*Uttarādhyayana Sūtra* 3.9).

Beyond its religious significance, *Upvas* also serves practical purposes for physical and mental well-being. The *Bhagavati Sūtra* (15.1) discusses how periodic fasting enhances bodily discipline, reduces diseases, and purifies the mind, aligning with modern scientific research on fasting-induced autophagy, improved insulin sensitivity, and metabolic regulation.<sup>10</sup> The integration of fasting with Dhyana (meditation) and Swadhyaya (self-study) further strengthens its role as a holistic tool for spiritual and physical rejuvenation. Through these principles, *Upvas* stands as a testament to the Jain way of life—one that promotes non-violence, self-control, and spiritual purity, while offering profound insights into modern wellness and longevity.



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## Types of Upvas in Jainism

Fasting (*Upvas*) in Jainism is a structured spiritual discipline aimed at self-purification and karmic shedding (*Nirjara*). Different types of fasting practices are outlined in Jain scriptures, each serving a distinct purpose in spiritual growth. The *Tattvārtha Sūtra* (9.3) emphasizes that self-restraint through fasting leads to the destruction of karma, bringing the soul closer to liberation (*Moksha*). The *Uttarādhyayana Sūtra* (30.14) classifies various fasting methods, demonstrating their role in ethical living and ascetic discipline.<sup>11</sup>

### 1. Complete Fasting (*Nirjal Upvas*)

*Ācārāṅga Sūtra* (1.2.3) | *Tattvārtha Sūtra* (9.19)

Complete fasting, or *Nirjal Upvas*, involves total abstinence from both food and water for a specified period, typically ranging from 24 to 48 hours. However, advanced practitioners may extend this duration significantly, undertaking more rigorous fasts such as *Ashtanhika* (eight days) or *Masakshamana* (one month). The primary purpose of this practice is to cultivate detachment from physical needs and distractions, allowing individuals to redirect their energy toward meditation, austerity, and self-purification, as emphasized in the *Tattvārtha Sūtra* (9.19). Traditionally aligned with the Jain lunar calendar, *Nirjal Upvas* is observed on significant occasions such as *Paryushana*, *Ayambil Oli*, and *Mahavir Jayanti*<sup>12</sup>. The *Ācārāṅga Sūtra* (1.2.3) underscores complete fasting as a means of self-discipline, enabling practitioners to attain inner stillness and equanimity by minimizing sensory attachments. Beyond its spiritual significance, this practice also contributes to karmic purification, heightened spiritual awareness, and mental discipline, while simultaneously promoting physical detoxification.<sup>13</sup>

### 2. Partial Fasting (*Unodari Upvas*)

*Dasavaikalika Sūtra* (6.11) | *Uttarādhyayana Sūtra* (30.21)

Partial fasting, known as *Unodari Upvas*, emphasizes minimal food intake while adhering to light and *sattvic* (pure) dietary principles. This practice involves consuming simple meals in limited quantities within restricted timeframes, ensuring that food remains a means of sustenance rather than indulgence.<sup>13</sup> The *Dasavaikalika Sūtra* (6.11) highlights that gradually reducing food intake weakens passions, making it a sustainable approach for individuals who seek to integrate fasting into their daily lives while fulfilling worldly responsibilities. The core focus of this fasting method is moderation and self-restraint, aiming to curb greed and overindulgence, as emphasized in the *Uttarādhyayana Sūtra* (30.21). Practitioners may follow this discipline by eating only one meal per day, consuming fruits and boiled water, or limiting their diet to easily digestible plant-based foods (Shah, 2021).

### 3. Restricted Eating (*Abhigrah Upvas*)

*Bhagavati Sūtra* (15.1) | *Tattvārtha Sūtra* (7.21)

Restricted Eating (*Abhigrah Upvas*) is a disciplined form of fasting in Jainism that emphasizes mindful consumption, where practitioners deliberately limit the variety or quantity of foods based on their spiritual commitment. This practice is not merely about dietary restriction but is deeply rooted in ethical and seasonal adaptations. According to the *Tattvārtha Sūtra* (7.21), these restrictions align with natural cycles to minimize harm to living beings. For instance, during the monsoon season, Jains abstain from consuming root vegetables to prevent the unintentional destruction of underground organisms. The spiritual significance of this practice is highlighted in the *Bhagavati Sūtra* (15.1), which emphasizes that conscious eating fosters gratitude and detachment. By viewing food as sustenance rather than indulgence, practitioners cultivate self-discipline and deepen their spiritual awareness.<sup>14</sup> Through *Abhigrah Upvas*, individuals integrate ethical awareness with their dietary habits, reinforcing the Jain principles of non-violence and self-restraint.

## Underlying Themes Across All Types of Upvas

The underlying themes across all types of *Upvas* in Jainism reflect a deep philosophical and spiritual foundation that extends beyond mere dietary restraint. A key aspect is *detachment from material desires*, where fasting acts as a means to transcend physical cravings and redirect one's focus toward spiritual progress. Another significant theme is *mindful consumption*, emphasizing awareness of dietary choices and their broader impact on the self and the environment, reinforcing interconnectedness and ethical living. Additionally, *Upvas* aligns with *natural rhythms*, often coinciding with



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lunar cycles and seasonal changes, illustrating a harmonious relationship with nature and the universe. Lastly, the practice embodies *holistic well-being*, integrating physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions to promote inner balance, karmic purification, and overall health. These themes collectively underscore the transformative essence of Upvas as a path toward self-discipline and enlightenment.

### Spiritual and Physical Dimensions of Upvas

The practice of *Upvas* (fasting) in Jainism is rooted in the holistic integration of the physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of human existence. Drawing from the *Tattvarthasutra*, a foundational Jain text, *Upvas* transcends the physical act of abstinence to embody a comprehensive approach to well-being.

#### Physical Dimensions of Upvas

**Rest and Repair for the Digestive System:** *Upvas* offers a break to the digestive system, allowing it to reset and function more efficiently. During fasting, the energy typically used for digestion is redirected toward cellular repair and detoxification. This aligns with modern findings on intermittent fasting, which suggest benefits like improved gut health and reduced inflammation.

**Metabolic Regulation:** By controlling food intake, fasting helps regulate metabolism, supporting hormonal balance, blood sugar stabilization, and fat utilization. Jain fasting often avoids heavy, tamasic (inert) foods, emphasizing light and sattvic (pure) nourishment when partial fasting is observed.

**Cellular Cleansing and Energy Conservation:** Fasting facilitates *autophagy*, the body's natural process of cellular cleansing, where damaged cells are broken down and recycled. This process is considered essential for longevity and disease prevention. Energy conservation during fasting allows the body to focus on healing and detoxification, supporting overall physical resilience.

#### Mental Dimensions of Upvas

**Development of Willpower:** Fasting demands mental discipline and self-restraint, fostering the development of willpower. This mental fortitude can carry over into other areas of life, enhancing one's ability to resist negative habits and distractions.

**Emotional Regulation:** *Upvas* provides an opportunity to practice equanimity (*Samata*), encouraging practitioners to remain calm and composed even in the absence of physical comforts like food. This contributes to emotional stability and resilience.

**Enhanced Concentration and Reduced Stress:** By focusing on meditation and spiritual practices during fasting, practitioners can improve concentration and mindfulness. The reduction of stress through fasting stems from its calming effects on the mind, as practitioners detach from worldly distractions and align with their inner self.

#### Spiritual Dimensions of Upvas

**Karmic Purification:** The primary spiritual goal of *Upvas* is *Nirjara*, the shedding of accumulated karmas. By abstaining from indulgence and focusing on introspection, practitioners work toward reducing karmic burden.

**Consciousness Elevation:** Fasting aids in elevating the soul's consciousness by minimizing attachment to physical needs and desires. This promotes spiritual clarity and deeper self-awareness.

**Self-Realization and Ethical Development:** *Upvas* is a tool for self-realization, helping individuals understand the transient nature of material life and focus on the eternal nature of the soul. The ethical dimension is enhanced as fasting is accompanied by non-violence (*Ahimsa*), truthfulness (*Satya*), and detachment (*Aparigraha*), fostering virtuous living.

**Alignment with Jain Cosmology:** Fasting aligns practitioners with the cosmic rhythm, as many *Upvas* rituals are based on lunar cycles and natural phenomena. This fosters a sense of harmony with the universe and reinforces spiritual connectivity.



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By harmonizing physical health, mental discipline, and spiritual liberation, Upvas creates a holistic framework for overall well-being. This integrative approach ensures that fasting is not merely an act of abstinence but a transformative practice—aligning body, mind, and soul on a unified path toward self-realization and inner balance.

### Practical Applications of Upvas in Daily Life

The principles of *Upvas* (fasting) in Jainism offer practical applications that can benefit individuals in modern contexts, promoting physical health, mental clarity, and spiritual growth:

#### Physical Well-being

**Detoxification Programs:** Incorporating regular fasting into daily life can aid in detoxifying the body. For instance, adopting periodic light fasting, such as consuming fruits and boiled water for a day, can promote digestive rest and metabolic health.

**Intermittent Fasting for Health:** Inspired by Jain practices, modern adaptations like intermittent fasting (e.g., 16:8 method) help in weight management, improving insulin sensitivity, and cellular repair, aligning with the physical goals of *Upvas*.<sup>15</sup>

#### Mental Discipline

**Mindfulness Training:** Practicing mindful eating and controlled fasting develops willpower, self-restraint, and equanimity. For instance, during fasting, consciously acknowledging hunger and choosing not to indulge fosters mental strength and emotional balance.

**Stress Reduction Techniques:** Using fasting days for meditation or prayer, as encouraged in Jainism, reduces stress by shifting focus from material distractions to inner peace. This practice can be integrated with modern mindfulness exercises.

#### Spiritual Practices

**Days of Reflection:** In a fast-paced world, dedicating specific days for partial or complete fasting provides an opportunity for introspection and spiritual focus. For example, observing fasting on significant lunar days or weekends allows one to step back from daily routines and align with deeper values.

**Ethical Consumption:** The principle of restricted eating (*Abhigrah*) can be applied to reduce overconsumption and waste. By limiting food variety or choosing plant-based, seasonal, and sustainable diets, individuals foster a sense of gratitude and harmony with nature.

#### Community and Cultural Enrichment

**Participation in Ritual Fasting:** Engaging in group fasting during Jain festivals like *Paryushana* or *Ayambil Oli* strengthens community bonds and reinforces cultural identity. These practices can inspire collective spiritual growth and shared values.

**Language of Compassion:** Fasting, guided by the principle of *Ahimsa* (non-violence), reminds individuals to live compassionately, promoting kindness toward all living beings. This can translate into adopting ethical practices like vegetarianism or veganism.

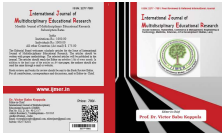
#### Integration with Modern Lifestyles

**Flexible Fasting Schedules:** For busy individuals, partial fasting (*Unodari*) provides a flexible option, allowing one to skip a meal or limit portions while maintaining focus on daily responsibilities. This balances spiritual goals with practical realities.

**Seasonal Adaptations:** Inspired by *Abhigrah*, dietary practices can be adjusted based on seasonal availability, ensuring health benefits while respecting ecological cycles. For instance, avoiding root vegetables during monsoons reduces harm to microorganisms, aligning with ecological ethics.

#### Modern Metabolic Health Challenges

Current global health statistics paint a concerning picture of metabolic health worldwide. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the International Diabetes Federation (IDF) reports that 537 million adults



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worldwide are living with diabetes.<sup>17</sup> India, too, is grappling with a growing obesity crisis. As per the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21), the prevalence of obesity among adults in India has increased significantly, with 24% of men and 27% of women classified as overweight or obese, compared to 19% and 21%, respectively, in NFHS-4 (2015-16). Urban areas show even higher obesity rates due to sedentary lifestyles and dietary changes.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, one in three adults globally exhibits multiple metabolic risk factors, contributing to annual healthcare costs exceeding \$2 trillion for obesity-related conditions alone.<sup>19</sup> These challenges stem from various modern lifestyle factors, including increasingly sedentary behaviour patterns, high consumption of processed foods, chronic stress levels, and disrupted circadian rhythms.<sup>20</sup> Environmental toxins and genetic predispositions further complicate this landscape, creating a complex web of contributing factors that demand comprehensive solutions.<sup>21</sup>

Modern medicine employs various interventions to address metabolic health challenges, including structured dietary modifications, physical activity programs, pharmaceutical interventions, bariatric surgery, and behavioural therapy.<sup>22</sup> However, these standard treatments face significant obstacles in achieving long-term success. Low adherence rates, high treatment costs, medication side effects, limited accessibility, and psychological barriers often impede sustainable lifestyle changes.<sup>23</sup> This complexity underscores the necessity for integrated, sustainable approaches to metabolic health management.

### **Bridging Ancient Wisdom and Modern Science**

Recent scientific research has provided substantial validation for many traditional Jain perspectives on fasting. Studies by Longo and Mattson (2021) highlight significant metabolic benefits, including enhanced insulin sensitivity, improved glucose regulation, reduced inflammation markers, and optimized lipid profiles. Hormonal research reveals balanced leptin and ghrelin levels, improved insulin response, enhanced growth hormone production, and regulated cortisol patterns.<sup>24</sup> At the cellular level, studies indicate increased repair mechanisms, enhanced mitochondrial function, reduced oxidative stress, and improved protein quality control, supporting the traditional understanding of fasting's profound physiological impacts.<sup>25</sup>

Modern scientific findings align remarkably with Jain fasting principles, particularly in circadian rhythm optimization, metabolic flexibility development, stress response improvement, and cellular regeneration promotion.<sup>26</sup> This convergence of ancient wisdom and contemporary research suggests opportunities for meaningful synthesis. Modified fasting protocols, mindfulness-based approaches, community support systems, and comprehensive educational programs can integrate both traditional and modern understanding to address metabolic health challenges sustainably.

### **Practical Applications**

The implementation of Jain fasting principles in contemporary healthcare settings requires careful adaptation and a systematic approach. Structured fasting programs inspired by Jain principles can be designed with individualized protocols tailored to patient needs. Clinical studies suggest that intermittent fasting protocols, such as the 16:8 regimen, can be effectively integrated into healthcare practices to improve insulin sensitivity, reduce inflammation, and promote metabolic flexibility.<sup>27</sup> Progress monitoring systems that track key biomarkers, including glucose levels, lipid profiles, and inflammatory markers, ensure the safety and efficacy of these interventions.<sup>28</sup>

For daily life integration, practitioners recommend modified timing patterns that accommodate modern schedules. For example, partial fasting or periodic abstinence from specific food groups, akin to Jain principles of Abhigrah (self-imposed dietary restrictions), can foster mindfulness and discipline while maintaining the spiritual and ethical components of fasting (Panda, 2016). These adaptations preserve the core benefits of traditional practices while ensuring accessibility and practicality in contemporary contexts. The practical implementation of Jain fasting principles in healthcare settings requires a structured approach that incorporates assessment protocols, treatment customization, progress monitoring, and safety guidelines. A comprehensive framework begins with thorough assessment protocols, which include evaluating an individual's metabolic health through glucose tolerance tests, lipid panels, and dietary habits to establish a baseline.<sup>29</sup> This foundational step ensures that fasting interventions are tailored appropriately. Treatment customization is crucial in aligning fasting protocols with individual needs, considering factors such as age, health status, and comorbidities while adhering to



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traditional Jain principles like mindful eating and self-restraint.<sup>30</sup> To ensure effectiveness, progress monitoring involves regularly tracking physiological markers and patient-reported outcomes, allowing for adjustments to fasting regimens as necessary.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, safety guidelines play a vital role in mitigating risks by ensuring proper hydration, nutrient intake, and medical supervision, particularly for vulnerable populations such as diabetics, the elderly, and pregnant women.<sup>32</sup> This structured approach facilitates the integration of Jain fasting into modern healthcare while maintaining both efficacy and safety. For personal practice, detailed guidelines include gradual progression strategies, starting with shorter fasts and advancing to more extended periods, as well as troubleshooting common challenges such as fatigue or hunger pangs. These strategies align with traditional Jain practices while incorporating modern scientific insights to ensure safety and effectiveness.

## Conclusion

This comprehensive analysis highlights the significant potential of Jain *Upvas* principles in addressing modern metabolic health challenges. Current research reveals remarkable parallels between traditional Jain fasting practices and contemporary scientific findings on the benefits of fasting for metabolic health. The holistic approach of Jain fasting, which integrates physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions, offers unique insights into developing sustainable and effective interventions for metabolic disorders. The integration of Jain principles into healthcare practices shows promise in enhancing treatment protocols. The inclusion of community support and spiritual dimensions contributes significantly to adherence rates, while modified versions of traditional fasting practices demonstrate effective implementation in modern healthcare settings.

Future research directions should prioritize large-scale clinical trials of modified Jain fasting protocols, the development of standardized implementation guidelines, and long-term outcome studies. Investigations into the psychological and spiritual benefits of these practices, as well as their cost-effectiveness in healthcare systems, will further strengthen the bridge between ancient wisdom and modern medical practice. This continued research will support the integration of traditional fasting principles into contemporary healthcare as a sustainable and holistic approach to metabolic health.

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