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Fasting – A Body/Mind/Spirit Healing

Allah the Almighty says in the Qur'an:

“And seek (Allah’s) assistance with Patience and Prayer; and truly it is extremely heavy and hard except for those with full submission. Who are certain that they are going to meet their Lord and that unto Him they are going to return.” 2:45–46

Numerous Prophetic traditions interpreted the ‘Patience’ in the Ayah as ‘fasting,’ which means fasting is the very first element of the spiritual journey to God. All the prophets in their spiritual journey have been seeking assistance with fasting.

1. Prophet Moses

“I had gone up the mountain to receive the stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant which He had made with you; and I remained on the mountain 40 days and 40 nights without eating bread or drinking water. Then the Lord gave me the two stone tablets..”¹

2. Prophet Jesus

In his spiritual journey was aided by fasting against the devil: “Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil, and after fasting 40 days and 40 nights he was hungry...”²

It also appears from chapter 5 of the Gospel of Luke that the disciples would frequently fast and pray.

3. Prophet of Islam

The entire Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet of Islam in the holiest night of the holiest month of Ramadhan; the month of fasting.

“The month of Ramadhan in which the Qur'an is revealed.” 2:185

“Indeed, We revealed it (the entire Qur’an) in the night of Measure.” 97:1

According to many Hadiths, the Torah was revealed to Moses on the 6th of Ramadhan, Injil was revealed to Jesus on the 12th of Ramadhan, Psalms of David revealed to him on the 18th of Ramadhan and the Holy Qur’an in the Night of Qadr (most probably 23rd of Ramadhan).³

In other words, all revelations occurred during the fasting month of Ramadhan. Could it be any reason more important than the spirituality of fasting?

Benefits of Fasting

1) Physical Healing

It is quoted from the Prophet of Islam to have said: “Fast, you’ll be healthy”. An Egyptian pyramid inscription in 3800B.C also reads: “Humans live on one-quarter of what they eat; on the three-quarters live their doctor!”

The three fathers of Western Medicine; (Hippocrates, Galen & Paracelsus) prescribed fasting as the greatest remedy and the physician within. Life Magazine in its September 1996 issue considered fasting: the healing revolution. There are more than 500 medical journal articles available on therapeutic fasting on the internet.

The outstanding physicians named fasting as being; the medicine for the 21st century. They believe the human body is designed to heal itself, if only given the opportunity. Dr. Otto Buchinger; Germany’s great fasting therapist after more than 100,000 fasting cures says: “Fasting is, without doubt, the most effective biological method of treatment.. it is the operation without surgery... it is a cure involving exudation, redirection, loosening up and purified relaxation.”

He furthers therapeutically; fasting cures many of our modern illnesses, including the following: allergies, cardiovascular disease, chronic diseases of the digestive system, degenerative and painfully inflammatory illnesses of the joints, myriad disturbances in one’s eating behavior, glaucoma, initial malfunction of the kidneys, tension and migraine headaches, as well as skin diseases. Preventively, it’s designed to cleanse, and to regenerate, rejuvenate and restore a person’s sense of well-being, in body, mind and soul. As Doctor Buchinger would conclude: "When the body fasts, the soul is hungry; when the body becomes lighter, the soul also craves relief."

Dr. Joel Fuhrman in Fasting and Eating for Health notes: “Fasting has been repeatedly observed to alleviate neuroses, anxiety and depression.”⁴

Fasting marvelously decomposes and burns all the cells and tissue that are aged, damaged, diseased, weakened or dead, a process called in medicine autolyze or self-digest or detoxification.

Michael Rosenbaum, M.D., Director of the California-based Orthomolecular Health Medicine Medical Society, notes on the significance of fasting as a detoxification program: "The hidden cause of many chronic pains, diseases and illnesses may be invisible toxins, chemicals, heavy metals and parasites that invade our bodies . . . Chances are slim that your doctor will tell you that toxins may be the root cause of your health problems. He or she may not even know about how these toxins are affecting your body . . . As your cells go, so goes your health. If your cells have been invaded by toxins and dangerous chemicals, your resistance to disease is diminished. Clean and nourish your cells, and you're on the road to better health."

When by fasting you stop the input of nutrition for a while, then a flurry of cleansing starts up, the rugs are lifted and the dirty dishes are brought out of the cabinet where they were stashed. Cleansing begins in earnest. U.S Congress approved \$20 million in 1998 for funding of the National Institutes of Health's fledgling office of Alternative Medicine. This went up to \$50 million in 1999 and to \$68.7 million in 2000 which shows the growing interest of the Congress.

Healing Crises

Those fasting sometimes experience side effects during the first days. The side effects may vary from fatigue, malaise, headaches, vomiting to the symptoms of cold and flu. These reactions are sometimes called in medicine healing crises, which are temporary and caused due to elimination and cleansing of toxins. A fasting person should be patient and let this period pass.

I should however stress that there are circumstances, which exempt people from fasting as mentioned in detail in the books of Islamic Jurisprudence, e.g. a diabetic who not only needs to take regular medication but their diet is very strict through out the day, hence should not fast, or else not only his/her fasting is void, it is even considered sinful. Similarly, a pregnant woman is exempt from fasting if it is going to either harm her or the baby. In general, the rule is that fasting is forbidden, if the person is confident that fasting will be physically harmful to them.

2) Social Healing

"Truly! Allah wrongs not mankind in aught; but mankind wrong themselves."10:44

A man wrote a letter to Imam Askari (a.s) asking him: "For what reason did Allah make fasting compulsory?"

The Imam (a.s) wrote in reply: "God has made fasting compulsory so that the rich shall find the pain of hunger so they have a mercy upon the poor."5

Starvation and its related diseases causes one person per second to die on this planet, 75% of them being infants and children under the age of 5.

Typically, stories involving deaths in Africa receive lesser coverage than those, which occur elsewhere.

Nonetheless, let us read the following news.

Exodus newsmagazine in its July 22, 2001 issue reported: **Starvation In Ethiopia, Help Slowly Arriving, Death Toll Cannot Be Determined** By Howard A. Gutman

“A massive tragedy is unfolding in Ethiopia as thousands of starving people are expected to die. Without help, many expect the death toll to be in the millions. Yet little is being done in the U.S.”

According to the same newsmagazine in the last famine, there were approximately one million deaths.

Now compare the above news with the following:

‘More than half of U.S adults (20+) are overweight. Nearly one-quarter of U.S adults are obese.’ And the figures are drastically increasing. This is despite all weight-loss programs in these countries.

According to Wolf & Colditz in ‘Current estimates of the Economic Cost of Obesity in the US 1998’:

“Economic cost in the U.S related to the overweight in 1995 was the total of \$99.2 billion. And according to the same source Americans spend \$33 billion annually on weight-loss products and services. This includes low calorie foods, artificially sweetened products; such as sodas and memberships to commercial weight-loss centres.

And if you want to know whether you are among those over-weight people in a time when starvation causes one person per second to die, here is your scale.

The biggest problem facing the world today is not people dying in the streets of Mumbai, Zimbabwe or Ethiopia; it is rather the lack of a sense of caring for those disadvantaged people whose rights have been usurped by others. Fasting provides the opportunity for the faster to feel and find for himself or herself the pain and agony that a poor person is going through. A fasting person can also keep his or her money, usually spent on lunch, away to feed a group of poor people with. Thus, Zakatul-fitreh is compulsory and is regarded as the compilation of fasting.

Nonetheless, some fasters sleep during the day as much as they can to avoid the so-called pains of fasting, and upon sunset enjoy a feast greedily and hence lose the entire medical, social and spiritual benefits of it.

Reduction of crimes during the month of Ramadhan is another social benefit of fasting.

3) Spiritual Healing

“O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you that you may gain self-restraint.” 2: 183

Despite all the abovementioned benefits of fasting, we believe the main benefits of religious fasting are

its spiritual rejuvenation and healing.

Fasting is prevention from certain things most of which are not only normally permissible but also even quite essential in our lives. By fasting we avoid food and drink which are the main nutritional sources for our body. This challenge against permissible and normally useful inputs is to give us the strength to avoid taking things that are harmful, including toxins, for our body and soul. In other words, I am able to fast against Halal food and soft drink over a month, should I not be able, by far, to fast against intoxicants and Haram foods over a year?

This is in spite of the fact that the first are my essential needs and the latter are not. A religious fasting is not just a physical diet program. When we fast from food we are expected to also fast from all harmful and forbidden actions and intentions. I may call this process a spiritual detoxification.

Fasting, if made with the intention of closeness to God, ascends one from the kingdom of animals to the realm of angels. You therefore, close your physical mouth to open your spiritual mouth. You fast your body to let your spirit feast with mysterious morsels. When you fast, you empty your stomach from the bread to fill it up with Unique Glorious Pearls.

Fasting is the Heart of Servitude

Fasting is prevention and prevention is separation and detachment and detachment is the heart and the reality of servitude to God.

Other benefits of Fasting

Fasting has many other benefits such as punctuality, patience, contentment and many others that unless one fasts cannot really realize them.

Degrees of Fasting

A Natural Diet

people at this level fast solely for medical purposes. This is certainly not a religious fasting.

Religious Fasting

Religious fasting may be observed in three different levels:

1. Fasting of Al-Shari'ah (Jurisprudential Fasting)

Fasting for many Muslims is mainly to refrain from what they must jurisprudentially refrain from such as eating, drinking, sexual intercourse etc. Although this is the lowest and the least level of religious fasting,

once it is offered for the sake of God, the faster is religiously considered fasting. To give you an idea of how low the level of this stage is, let me share some examples with you. A Muslim girl may fast without practicing her Islamic dress code at school and her fasting is valid on this level. A Muslim may observe fasting and yet listens to rock and roll and his/her fasting is jurisprudentially valid.

No doubt, the purpose of fasting is not just to avoid food and drink and hence this is the very lowest level of fasting for the very beginners to start their journey towards perfection and promotion. Thus, it is quoted from the Prophet of Islam (S) that: “Many people gain nothing from their fasting save hunger and thirst.”⁶

The Shari’ah fasting is prescribed for beginners as a form of training to help them become acquainted to waking up at dawn with the excuse of eating and drinking lest they feel hungry and thirsty during the day, in order for them to experience the pleasant breeze at dawn, to be awake at a time when the divine cups of spirituality are served.

The least he is expected, therefore, to gain by the end of Ramadhan is to have gotten used to offering his/her morning prayers on time.

A faster at this level is expected to think why he or she is told to refrain from eating and drinking which are essential nutrition for his or her body? Could it be that by refraining from consuming the essentials I learn to more easily refrain from unnecessary and even harmful inputs to my body and soul? Once he or she successfully finishes a month of Shari’ah fasting by refraining from soft drinks and Halal food and even finds him/herself healthier than before, the faster should find it easier by far to avoid intoxicants or Haram foods which are even harmful for his or her body and does not really require.

Once the faster is aware of such facts, they will be ready to enter the higher level of fasting, which I have called the fasting of Al-Tariqat.

2. Fasting of Al-Tariqat (Ethical Fasting)

This is the fasting of noble people. People in this degree not only fast from what is jurisprudentially mentioned, but they also observe an ethical fasting too. Such noble fasters let their eyes, ears and all other body parts fast against whatever which is regarded in religion as Haram. Gossiping is always Haram, but for them it is more Haram during the fasting period. Non-Islamic dress is always Haram but for them is an essence during Ramadhan. This is called the fasting of Tariqat. Imam As-Sadiq (a.s) is quoted from his ancestors from the Prophet of Islam (S):

“When you fast, let your ears, your eyes, your hair, your skin and all your body fast too. Do not let your fasting day be the same as non-fasting ones.”⁷

It is quoted from Prophet Jesus to have said: “Renew yourselves and fast, for I tell you truly, except you fast, you shall never be freed from the power of Satan, and from all disease that come from Satan.”⁸

A lady whilst fasting was swearing at her maid in the presence of the Prophet of Islam (S). The Prophet (S) offered her some food to eat. She said: "I'm fasting O Messenger of God!" the Prophet replied: "How are you fasting and you swear at your maid. Fasting is not only from food and drink. Indeed God made it that way so that food and drink are used as a veil against other sins, verbal or action. How few are fasting and how many are just hungry."9

3. Fasting of Al-Haqiqat (Mystical Fasting)

This is the highest level of fasting, which belongs solely to the special nobles. Fasters- who are not many- at this degree believe you are what you think and hence they fast from all other than God including, Paradise. They make sure that during the month of Ramadhan they detach themselves from whatever which is other than God. This state of absolute detachment (Al-Enqeta') is the reality of servitude to God. This is why I named this stage the fasting of Al-Haqiqat (Reality).

They believe as physical fasting burns the fat and removes the toxins, such mental fasting also does the same to the mind. The reward of fasting in this degree is none other than God Himself, the Almighty. This is the meaning of the Holy Hadith that Allah the Almighty says: "I will reward all rituals of mankind from ten times to seven hundred times save Patience, for it is for Me and I am its reward, and Patience is **fasting**."10

A faster at this stage, since he or she is fasting from other than God, deserves to be His guest in His month. This status is called in Islamic mysticism Assimilation in God, (*Al-Fana' Fil-Lah*) which is the ultimate purpose of servitude to God. To this end, Muslim mystics consider fasting even greater than prayers, in that, the devotee during his prayers needs to engage his organs, which in a sense means engagement within the self, whereas fasting is equal to refraining and detachment and requires no engagement. This is the stage where one can gain the Visit of God as described in the Ayah, in the beginning of this article, as the ultimate purpose of servitude to God.

1. Deut 9:9

2. Matt 4: 1-10

3. Al-Kafi; Vol.2, p.628, Vol.4, pp 157, 159, 193

4. Fasting and Eating for Health, by Dr. Joel Fuhrman, p. 19.

5. Bihar al-Anwar Vol.96, p.339.

6. Bihar al-Anwar Vol.87: P.207.

7. Bihar al-Anwar Vol.96 p.292.

8. From Dead Sea Scrolls found in 1947.

9. Bihar al-Anwar Vol.96 p.293.

10. Bihar al-Anwar Vol.96, p.252.

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