

A Summary of the Teachings of Islam on Fasting

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As this is the last Friday before the end of this Ramadan, I will sum up the teachings of the Quran about fasting as found in the section of *Surah al-Baqarah*, ch. 2, verses 183–188. First we are told, as you well know:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الصِّيَامُ كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ
لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ

“O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may guard against evil.” (2:183)

Our Holy Prophet Muhammad, with his human knowledge, could not have known that the practice of fasting was universal among mankind. He knew, of course, that there was fasting among the Jews, and among the Christians. But he could not have known that it was practised in religions that he knew nothing of, such as Hinduism and Buddhism. It came into Buddhism because it already existed in Hinduism, from which Buddhism developed. So this statement in the Quran is knowledge from God, that fasting was prescribed for “those before you”.

The Holy Prophet was accused of fabricating his revelations, that these were not from God but the outcome of his own thoughts, ambitions and desires. Such a person would put his own personal stamp on the religion he was creating, or at the most his religion would reflect the thinking of his own community and people. His aim would be to make himself prominent, or at the most to put his own nation and its traditions at the forefront of his religion. But Islam, when instituting fasting, has referred it to as having been the agreed practice among all mankind, saying that Muslims should fast because all sections of humanity, following earlier religions, had found it useful.

Then straight away the aim of fasting is mentioned: to learn to refrain from all acts of wrongdoing. Through fasting an individual develops the qualities of self-control, patience and thankfulness, which reduce his greed and his inability to be

ever satisfied. Fasting is, of course, *self-denial*. Generally people wish for and try to get *self-satisfaction*. But in this world, things exist in opposite pairs, like day and night, male and female, etc. Just one of these cannot exist by itself. It requires the other to exist. So self-satisfaction cannot exist by itself and be there all the time. Its opposite, self-denial, must also exist and be experienced.

Fasting in Islam is not only for developing self-control over desires. One of the well-known verses about fasting is the following verse (2:186):

وَإِذَا سَأَلَكَ عِبَادِي عَنِّي فَإِنِّي قَرِيبٌ ۖ أُجِيبُ دَعْوَةَ الدَّاعِ إِذَا دَعَانِ ۚ فَلْيَسْتَجِيبُوا لِي وَلِيُؤْمِنُوا بِي لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْشُدُونَ

It begins: “When My servants ask you about Me, surely I am near”. These “servants” of God asking the Holy Prophet about God are not only Muslims but all humans, including atheists. Does God exist, and if so, what is He? The answer given here is that He is not sitting far above in heaven, where man cannot reach, but is accessible very close to man. People often ask for the ‘proof’ of the existence of God. Even if some rational proof could be provided by arguments and evidence, and a person accepted it, all that would happen is that he would believe that God exists, and nothing more. It would bring no change in his life nor would he find out what God requires him to do or not to do. This verse tells us that a person needs to reach God as a matter of *experience*, and not just know that God exists somewhere.

The verse goes on to say: “I answer the prayer of the supplicant when he calls on Me”. Here there are three words are based on the word *du`ā* or “call”. These are: “prayer” (*da`wah*), “supplicant” or the one praying (*dā`i*), and “he calls on Me” (*da`āni*). By calling on God here is not meant only praying in words, but seeking God in any manner, by mental efforts or by physical exertion (as in fasting). God answers the call. The verse then continues: “so they should hear My call and believe in Me that they may walk in the right way.” God’s answering the call is also dependent on man responding to God by believing in Him and committing himself to walking in the ways taught by God.

The founders of the great religions of the world had the experience mentioned in this verse to the highest level that is possible for a human being. Before they received the message and the guidance from God to convey to people, they

enquired within their minds about God, thought hard, and at the same time they engaged in quite hard and prolonged prayer and fasting. Their questions were answered and they were charged with a mission to take to the people.

So far I have dealt with an individual's personal moral and spiritual development through fasting. The second of the two fundamental branches of religion is our relations with others in this world. It is expressed in fasting by means of charity towards others. We are familiar with the hadith that the Holy Prophet Muhammad was the most generous of all people, but in the month of Ramadan his generosity towards them excelled itself. It was like the wind blowing on each and every person. Muslims have to follow this example of charity during Ramadan. In any case, the charity of Eid-ul-Fitr (*sadaqat-ul-fitr*) is obligatory on them to give. Also, as we know, those who cannot fast at all, neither during Ramadan nor afterwards, must feed a poor person everyday for each fast missed.

But this is not the only connection between fasting and our relations with other people in the world. The last verse in the section on fasting is as follows:

“And do not swallow up your property among yourselves by false means, nor seek to gain access thereby to the judges, so that you may swallow up a part of the property of (other) people wrongfully while you know.” (2:188)

In fasting we learn to give up voluntarily even what rightfully belongs to us. From this, we train ourselves to refrain from taking from others what is not ours at all. Taking what belongs to others involves the use of false means, of lying, deception, misuse of our position, etc. But what is the meaning of swallowing up *your property*? How can a person take his own property by false means? It is allowed to him, legally and morally in any case. What is meant here is the property of the community or the nation. For example, we contribute something towards taxes, but all the money collected by taxation is our property in a national sense. We elect the government on the basis of how we want it to spend all that money. So all of it is our shared property. In fact, all the nation's wealth, including privately owned wealth, can be called our property. The same applies to community organizations to which people contribute. What is meant here by “among yourselves by false means” is people colluding with each other to misuse public or community property. Bribery and corruption is never an individual's isolated act. He is known to others who let him do it, who support him and who take their share from him. This is plainly

forbidden in this verse. It also mentions bribing officials so that they give the decision in your favour that you can have what is rightfully someone else's.

These practices are the bane and curse of the Muslim world, and everyone recognizes that if these evils are eliminated then those countries would be completely transformed into just and fair societies.

The last point I wish to make is that in the Quran, immediately upon commanding us to fast, a great concern and care is expressed for relieving its hardship. Verse 184 says that it is only for "a certain number of days", which amounts to 1/12th of the year. Those who are sick or travelling are exempt while in those conditions. The definition of sick and travelling is left up to the individual. The opinion of early Muslims was that sickness meant any illness, and that the sick included pregnant women, women suckling a baby, and old people. The principle is clearly stated that: "Allah desires ease for you, and He does not desire hardship for you" (2:185).

It is reported in Bukhari (h. 1944, 1948) that while leading the expedition from Madinah for the conquest of Makkah in the month of Ramadan the Holy Prophet and some of his Companions were fasting on the journey, but others decided not to fast. After reaching a certain place, the Holy Prophet decided to abandon fasting for the rest of the journey. He called for some water, held it high to show people and broke his fast. Fasting on the journey was by people's own choice. It is said this was at the time of *Asr*.

What is striking here is that Jesus told his followers that when they fast, it should not be to show people, so that they are not like hypocrites, fasting for show. The Holy Prophet Muhammad took this one step further. When he was not fasting he made sure that he showed it to people so they don't remain under the misimpression that he was fasting!

This example of the Holy Prophet also shows that if a person who is sick decides to fast, and during the fast he feels more sick, and unable to continue, he may break his fast before the fast ending time because his fast was by choice. This applies whether it is in Ramadan or outside Ramadan. It also applies to a person who becomes ill during a fast.

Verse 187 declares that normal relations between husband and wife are lawful during the night in Ramadan, except if in the last ten nights one or both of them are observing the *Itikaf*. It says to certain Muslims: “You acted unjustly to yourselves, so He turned to you in mercy”. Under a misconception, some Muslims thought that such relations were not allowed in Ramadan even at night. There were also some Muslims who thought that if they missed *iftar* because of being asleep at that time, then they couldn’t eat or drink anything till the next *iftar*. The Quran said to them: You were too hard on yourselves. It told them clearly that all the time from *iftar* till the following dawn of light, all normal activities were allowed (except if observing *itikaf*). It is the same verse which says to men about their wives: “They are an apparel for you and you are an apparel for them”, each is like the clothing for the other. This is a reciprocal relationship of equality.

The Holy Prophet himself sometimes practised *wiṣāl* or “joined” fasting. This is where, instead of breaking the fast, a person continues it to make it a two or three day long continuous fast. But he forbade such fasting to his followers. He said he disallowed it to them “out of mercy for them ... and because severity in religion is disapproved.” About his own case he said: “While I spend the night, my Lord gives me food and drink. So undertake deeds of only the hardship for which you have the strength.”

There is the well-known incident that one night during Ramadan the Holy Prophet came out to pray his *Tahajjud* prayers in the mosque and some people joined him. The next night more people joined him, and more again on the third night. On the fourth night he did not come out till the *Fajr* prayer and after *Fajr* he told people that he didn’t come out for *Tahajjud* because it might be considered obligatory for Muslims and they might not be able to carry on observing it.

Looking at how fasting is presented to Muslims in the Quran, it is not done by Allah telling them: “fast or you will go to hell”, or “if you don’t fast Allah will be displeased with you”, or “don’t make any excuses to get out of fasting”. It is done by showing people its benefits, making it easier for them in every way, lifting their self-imposed hardship, and granting them concessions such as rinsing your mouth for coolness, and tasting food on your tongue.

The Holy Prophet himself encouraged Muslims to start the fast at the latest possible moment and to eat at that time and he advised them to hasten to end the

fast, saying that they will benefit from doing so. Once, while riding a camel on a journey, he asked someone to prepare his fast-ending meal. The man said: But the sun is still out. The Holy Prophet repeated his instruction to prepare the meal. The man again said: But the sun is still out, but the Holy Prophet repeated his instruction and made the man prepare the meal. He ended his fast and said words to the effect that you should look east and if you see the evening advancing from that direction then end the fast.

بَارَكَ اللهُ لَنَا وَتَكْرَمَ فِي الْقُرْآنِ الْعَظِيمِ، وَنَفَعَنَا وَإِيَّاكُمْ بِالآيَاتِ وَالذِّكْرِ الْحَكِيمِ،
إِنَّهُ تَعَالَى جَوَادٌ كَرِيمٌ مَلِكٌ بَرٌّ رَوْفٌ رَحِيمٌ-

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