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## Dialogue on Sawm (fasting)

My father commenced his words on the subject of the month of Ramadhan in a husky trembling voice; the glow in his eyes told of an inner awe for this month. It is no wonder because it brings to mind all that which is good, exquisite, beautiful, blissful, merciful, and forgiving.

To reinforce these concepts, he transported me to the time of the Prophet (s.a.w.), precisely to his famous sermon welcoming the approach of the fasting season, "O people! This is the month of God coming to you with mercy, blessing, and forgiveness; in the sight of Allah, it is the most superior month; its days, nights, and hours are the best. In this month you are the guests of God, enjoying His hospitality. You have been rendered among those who have won His grace. Your every breath shall be deemed utterances of glory to His Name, your sleep a form of worship. Your deeds shall be accepted, your prayers answered. So, with sincerity and pure hearts, pray to your Creator to grant you success in fasting this month and reciting His Book. The wretched is he who is denied the Almighty's forgiveness during this august month.

O men and women! During this month, the gates of everlasting bliss are ajar; so beseech your Lord not to close them off to you. The gates of the Fire are closed; so entreat Him not to open them for you. The devils are in fetters; so implore Him not set them free lest they should lead you astray".

After he related this part of the sermon, he drew my attention to what I should be doing during this month stressing certain parts of the sermon. He went on quoting the Prophet (s.a.w.), "O people! He who provides a meal to a devout Muslim, at the end of his long day fast, during this month, his reward from God shall be as great as that for emancipating a slave, and he can be rest assured of the forgiveness of his past sins".

Someone interjected, "O Prophet of God! Not all of us can afford to provide food for fasting people". He retorted, "Fear God, even with half a date. Feed them, for the sake of God, albeit with a sip of water, because the Almighty grants those a full reward who have done a small deed, if he could not afford to do more.

O people! he who strives, during this month, to deal gently and politely with people, shall be guaranteed

passage to paradise, on the Day when many a foot slips (leading to hell). Those who minimize the burden of those in their employ (mulkul yameen), The Lord shall make their reckoning easy. He who checks his transgression, Allah shall withhold His wrath from him on the Day of Judgement. Whoever shuns his kinsmen, Allah shall deny him His mercy on the Day of Reckoning. He who recites just one verse of the Holy Qur'an, during this month, Allah shall grant him the reward of having recited the whole Book in other months".

No sooner had my father finished relating those segments of the Prophet's sermon, he criticised the behaviour of some fasting Muslims who mistakenly believe that fasting is abstaining from food and drink per se. To refute such belief, he quoted Imam Ali (a.s.) as saying, "There is many a fasting man who yields nothing from his fast other than thirst. And how many a worshipper whose night prayer gains him nothing but stress".

He related another hadith from Imam as–Sadiq (a.s.), "When you fast, make sure that your hearing, seeing, hair, skin, and all your faculties refrain (from that which is incompatible with fasting). The Imam was also reported as saying, "Fasting should not be confined to abstaining from food and drink. You should restrain your tongues from telling lies, cast your eyes away from that which Allah has ordained not to be looked at. Do not engage in conflict. Do not envy each other. Do not backbite, swear at or curse one another. Avoid giving false testimony. Be like one who is anticipating to move to the next world, counting in the process your days, waiting for that which God Almighty has promised you, and always taking stock of your deeds in anticipation of having audience with Him. Take to God–inspired peace of mind and dignified bearing; take to submissiveness and humility – the submissiveness of a slave, fearing his master".

My father told me a story that took place at the time of the Prophet (s.a.w.). The Prophet (s.a.w.) heard a woman calling her maid names. He called for food to be served to her. She said that she was fasting. He said to her, "Why are you fasting when you have just called your maid names? Fasting is not simply abstaining from food and drink. It is a means of refraining from committing sins by word and deed. How scarce genuine fasting is and how abundant hunger".

- \* I felt so humble and said to my father, "It is time I should fast the month of Ramadhan, and I shall start this year. However, what is the way to knowing that the month has started"?
- You should be able to know that by sighting the new moon in your country or nearby countries that share the same horizon; in other words, if the crescent is sighted in one country, it should be seen in the other, were it not for natural barriers, such as clouds, mountainous terrain, and the like.
- \* What is the proof of sighting the moon?
- The evidence could be one or more of the following:
- 1. You have sighted it yourself.

- 2. The testimony of two men of impeccable character, provided that you do not have any knowledge of instances that they may be wrong, and that you do not dispute their testimony.
- 3. The lapse of thirty days on the month of Sha'ban, thus reaching certitude that Sha'ban has come to an end and that Ramadhan shall commence.
- 4. When the news of the birth of the moon of Ramadhan becomes commonplace that you are sure of the sighting.
- \* Suppose I did not know whether it will be the start of Ramadhan, and I intend to fast tomorrow. How would this day be treated?
- You make your niyyah as though this day was of Sha'ban. If, however, during the day it was announced that it was the first day of Ramadhan, you rectify the niyyah and your fast shall be in order; i.e. there shall be no need for you to fast instead.
- \* How would I know that Ramadhan has drawn to a close and that the month of Shawwal has started?
- In the same way/s you have come to know of the sighting, and/or the start, of Ramadhan.
- \* All right. If I have concluded that I sighted the moon of Ramadhan?
- You should fast. So too should every Muslim who is adult, sane, and sure that fasting would not endanger their health, nor on a journey, or in a comma.

As for women, they should be fasting, provided that they are not in a state of haydh or nifas, for they are not required to fast. They must, though, make up for the days of fasting they missed out at a later date.

- \* Should someone fear that fasting may harm them, what should they do?
- He who fears for himself of falling ill as a result of fasting is not required to fast. Nor is he who believes that fasting would worsen his poor state of health in any way, be it hampering his recovery or increasing his pain. This should, however, be commensurate with what is generally accepted in these circumstances.
- \* What about the person who is on a journey?
- If he sets out for a journey after zawaal, [he should continue with his fast]. Should he set out before dawn, he should not fast.
- \* What if he travels after dawn?
- In this case, [fasting is not in order, irrespective of whether or not it was clear in his mind that he intended to travel the evening before]. He should, therefore, do qadha.

- \* If I want to fast, how should I go about it?
- You should make niyyah, of seeking proximity to and pleasure of Allah, the Most High, for fasting from the onset of dawn to sunset.
- \* Doesn't fast mean abstention?
- Yes.
- \* What should I abstain from?
- You should abstain from nine things believed to cause a fasting person to break fast.
- 1 and 2. Deliberate eating and drinking, be it little or much.
- \* What if I did not do it on purpose?
- As long as you did it inadvertently, your fast should be in order.
- \* Can I rinse my mouth with water without swallowing it?
- Yes, you can do that. If, however, the intention of rinsing was to seek cooling off and the water found its way to your stomach, you should make up for that day (qadha). Yet, if you swallowed the water unknowingly, you don't have to do qadha.
- \* Can I dip my head in water, taking precautions, in the process, not to let water find its way to my stomach?
- Yes, you can do that, albeit it is absolutely makrooh.
- 3. [Deliberately telling lies to Allah, or His Messenger (s.a.w.), or the Infallible Imams (a.s.)].
- 4. Deliberate sexual intercourse.
- \* What about the fasting man and his wife?
- They can have sexual intercourse outside fast times.
- 5. All kinds of masturbation.
- 6. Deliberate staying in a state of janabah until dawn. If a person had a sexual intercourse that rendered them in a state of janabah, they should do ghusl before the onset of fajr (dawn), so that they are tahir to embark on fast.
- \* Suppose I entered a state of janabah during the night, but could not do ghusl due to being unwell, for instance, what should I do?

- You should do tayamum before the onset of dawn.
- \* What about women?
- If they become tahir after being in either a state of haydh or nifas, they must do ghusl before the onset of dawn, so that they fast while in a state of tahara.
- \* Suppose I was asleep during the day, and dreamed having a sexual intercourse precipitating ejaculation. What should I do?
- The emission of semen in this case should not render the fast invalid. It should be in order, even without performing ghusl.
- 7. [Deliberate inhaling of air laden with thick smoke or dust].
- 8. Deliberate throwing up.
- \* What if this takes place beyond one's control?
- It wouldn't invalidate one's fast.
- 9. Intravenous injection with water or other liquids.
- \* Should a fasting person intentionally commit any of the aforesaid acts, what should they do?
- They should refrain from committing those acts and make amends according to the following detail:
- a. Should a fasting person remain in a state of janabah on purpose until the onset of dawn, they should abstain during the day [Let their abstention be in a form of alqurbal mutlaqah, i.e. without specifying that this abstention is for the obligation of fast of Ramadhan or out of courtesy thereof].
- b. In the case of lying to Allah, His Messenger, or inhaling thick smoke or dust, [they should abstain from eating or drinking for the rest of the day in compliance with the lawful injunction is either to carry out the obligation of fast or to abstain, i.e. from eating and drinking out of respect].
- c. For nullifying one's fast due to committing any of the other acts, [they should abstain for the rest of the day out of respect for the lawful injunction].

In addition, one has to make up for the days that have been rendered invalid and pay an expiation. This could take the form of either emancipating a slave, feeding sixty poor people, or fasting two consecutive months for each day of fasting that had been rendered null. This is so, irrespective of whether rendering fast invalid was by something lawful (halal), such as drinking water, or unlawful (haraam), such as drinking alcohol or masturbation.

\* How would you feed sixty poor people?

- You could serve them with food, making sure that they had their fill. You could also supply them with foodstuffs by giving them approximately 750 gm each, of either dates, wheat, flour, rice, moong beans or the like for every day that you missed by default. You, cannot, however, give them money instead. You could do so, though, only by way of proxy, i.e. by authorizing the poor person to buy the foodstuff on your behalf and take possession of it.
- \* What if I was not able to fast any days of Ramadhan for a valid reason, such as sickness, or travel?
- You could make up for any number of days by fasting during the year, except for the days of the two eids (al-Fitr, and al-Adh'ha).
- \* Suppose my illness continued until the next Ramadhan. How should I go about it?
- You won't be required to do qadha. Instead, fidya (redemption from certain religious obligations by a material donation or ritual act), becomes due. In this case, you should give to the poor by way of sadagah 750 gm of food for each day that you missed.

Having said that, I must remind you of the following:

- 1. It is not permissible to fast on either the first day of Eidul Fitr or the first day of Eidul Adh'ha, be it qadha or for any other purpose.
- 2. [The eldest son of the deceased should make up for any period of fast that his father had missed out during his lifetime for a valid reason. So too are the periods of fast the father did not do, even though he was able to do so. This can, however, be done by the son, if he was not a minor at the time of his father's death nor was denied his inheritance].
- 3. There are certain categories of people who are allowed not to fast:
- a. The elderly, who cannot fast, or fasting could cause them aggravation or difficulty. In this case they should resort to fidya, by donating 750 gm of wheat, which is preferable, for every day they did not fast. They are, though, not required to do gadha.
- b. The expectant mother, who is approaching the date of delivery, and who feels that fasting could entail danger to her wellbeing or that of her baby. In this case, she should make up for the days missed later.
- c. The nursing mother, who is experiencing a lack of milk, and whose fast could harm her or her baby, [provided that she was the only source of her boy's suckling]. Conversely, it is not permissible for her not to fast. If, however, it was permissible for her not to fast, she must make up for the days she missed.

However, it is incumbent on both, the nursing mother and expectant mother to make amends by donating 750 gm of food for every day they did not fast.

4. Like prayer, which is either obligatory or voluntary, fasting can be either too. Rather, it is one of such

voluntary acts of worship that are strongly recommended – tradition has it, "It is a refuge from hell", "It is a form of zakat that renders the body pure", "By it the worshipper enters paradise", etc.

It has been related that fasting in the following days and occasions is highly rewarding:

- a. Three days in each month, preferably the first and last Thursday of the month and the first Wednesday of the last ten days of it.
- b. The anniversary of the birthday of the Prophet (s.a.w.) and the day he was summoned to declare his Prophethood.
- c. The Day of al-Ghadeer (Celebrating the appointment, by the Prophet 's.a.w.', of Imam Ali 'a.s.' as his successor).
- d. The 25th day of Thil Qi'dah.
- e. The 24th day of Thil Hijjah.
- f. The whole, or part, of Rajab.
- g. The entirety, or part thereof, of Sha'ban.

And last, but not least, my father narrated to me this tradition from Imam as-Sadiq (a.s.), "In order that your fast be fully accepted, you should give zakat", meaning zakatul fitra (a specified type of religious dues paid by the worshippers when they complete the fasting of Ramadhan).

My father added that it is incumbent on every adult who is sane and has provisions for the entire year to set aside zakatul fitra for himself and his dependants, be they members of his immediate family or others, and be they children or adults, including those guests who arrive on the eve of Eid [or after it has set in].

The amount of zakatul fitra, per head, is three kg. of wheat, barley, dates, raisins, other foodstuffs, or their value in money. It has to be set aside on the eve of Eid, or on the day of Eid [before prayer, for those who performed it], and up to zawaal for those who did not say the Eid prayer. This should be paid to the poor and the needy, who are eligible to receive income support from monetary tax (zakatul maal). (See Dialogue on Zakat).

It is to be noted, however, that the zakat of those who are not of a Hashimite descent is not halal for the Hashimites.

Zakatul Fitra should not be given to one's dependants, such as father, mother, wife, and offspring.

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