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The Beginning of Servitude: Contemplation on the Spiritual and Epistemic Aspects of Fasting

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Abstract

Fasting is a practice that has always been recommended by health experts throughout history, and is practiced in religions other than Islam, such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism. This article delves into the spiritual and epistemic features and benefits of fasting; it purges the root of lust, strengthens a person's will power, and improves a person's ability to contemplate. A person's fast comes with restraining himself from immoral thoughts and actions, and has a lasting effect. Additionally, several narrations are offered to reveal its significance as well as its effects on people in this world and in the next.

In this paper, we will study some narrations to demonstrate the importance of fasting and its effects on people in this world and the hereafter. Then, we will have a brief analysis on how fasting functions in one's spiritual progress as well as in gaining wisdom and better understanding.

Narrations on the importance of fasting

In the famous Hadith of Mi'raj, ¹ God told His Prophet: "Worshiping is [consists of] ten parts, out of which nine parts is gaining halal (permissible) provision." The Prophet then asked God, "What is the first act of worship?" or more precisely, the Prophet asked what the first step of servitude was. God answered, "The first is silence and fasting." Then the Prophet asked, "Oh my Lord, what is the outcome of fasting?" God replied, "Fasting brings wisdom; wisdom brings knowledge; and knowledge brings certainty. When a servant achieves certainty it no longer matters to him whether he lives in difficulty or in ease."²

An explanation regarding this narration and the effect of fasting on one's ability to understand will be offered afterwards in this article.

In a sermon, the Prophet said, "Whoever fasts in the month of Ramadan by listening [to what is useful for his success] and prevents his ears, eyes, tongue and his other organs from immoral acts – such as lying and backbiting – with the intention of getting closer to God, God will make him close to Himself in a way that he will be close in level to Prophet Abraham."³

In another narration the Prophet said, "God says 'All righteous acts of man will be rewarded ten to seventy times more than they deserve – except for patience, which is mine and I will reward it.'" Then the Prophet said: "Thus, the reward of patience is stored in the divine knowledge and patience [here] means fasting."⁴ It has also been stated in the Qur'an that only those who fast will receive unlimited reward:

إِنَّمَا يُوفَّى الصَّابِرُونَ أَجْرَهُمْ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ

Indeed, the patient will be paid in full their reward without any reckoning. (Qur'an 39: 10)

Imam Sadiq said, "Fasting from food and drinks is not accomplished only by not eating and drinking; when you fast, your ears, eyes, tongue and your body should fast. Remain silent except for when you want to say a good thing. And be considerate to your servants."⁵

These narrations show how fasting is amongst the most important factors that bring about God's pleasure and hence needs special attention. The question that rises at this point is: What is the philosophy behind the emphasis of fasting?

Fasting is examined from different aspects as seen in the following:

A) Fasting is a form of non-action

One may wonder how all these rewards are given to a person who fasts, especially considering that he does not do any particular act. Performing a prayer, reciting the Qur'an, or going on a pilgrimage are actions we perform; however, we do not do anything when we fast. Indeed, similar to silence, fasting is a form of non-action (tark). Interestingly, according to the above narration, the best of worship or the beginning of servitude, i.e. silence and fasting, are accomplished by restraining oneself from performing certain actions. For the former, one must not talk, backbite, and lie. For the latter, one must not eat or drink. This shows that if man does not ruin his capital, he will attain closeness to God. It is important that man does not commit any harmful acts.

In a conversation between the Prophet and Abu Dharr, the Prophet said, "Oh Abu Dharr, prayer with goodness is needed as much as salt is needed for the food."⁶ According to this narration, if a pious person prays a little, his prayer will be granted. As even a little amount of salt can flavour food, a little of good action while not committing sins or wrongdoing can help. Of course, it is better to try; however, one's main endeavour should be to seek piety.

Some people pay much attention to quantity; they perform many good actions, such as reciting or invoking or frequently performing pilgrimages. Though these are unquestionably very good acts on the divine path, these are deeds that benefit those who strive to first prevent themselves from committing sins. The one who has many preferable deeds while simultaneously committing sins is like a person who has a backpack with a hole at the bottom of it; all day long he frequently and quickly fills the bag though at the end, he is left with nothing. If one mends his bag, even a small object will be saved for him no matter how much gold and jewelry he accumulates. In the famous hadith of Qurbe Nawafil, God says:

"None of my servants has approached me by a thing that is dearer to me than wajibat (the obligatory deeds). [Then] By doing the nawafil (preferable deeds) my servant approaches me to an extent that I will love him. And whenever I love a servant I will be his ear by which he hears, his eyes by which he sees, and his hand by which he uses. And if he calls Me I will reply and if he asks for something I will grant it."⁷

Therefore, a person must first perform the wajibat and restrain from muharramat (prohibited acts). It is when this step has been taken that the nawafil and mustahabat (preferable deeds) will become useful and will take man to the peak of perfection which is proximity to God.

Thus, perhaps one of the reasons why fasting and silence have been highly emphasized is to help man avoid any obstacles to take him towards God. Of course, recommended deeds will speed this up and take him to higher levels; however, as mentioned, the first step is to refrain from actions that are wrong and prevent development. This is the most challenging part. If we were asked to recite five sections (juz') of the Qur'an it would be easier for us than to be asked to remain silent for the same amount of time. Thus, one of the features of fasting is that when fasting, man restrains from certain actions, thereby

developing greater control over his behaviour and deeds.

B) There is little room for insincere intentions in fasting

One aspect of fasting is that there is less likelihood that one holds insincere intentions, or shows off (riya'), because it is not visible to others. Others notice when one is praying or reciting the Qur'an; however, fasting goes unnoticed as long as the person does not want others to know or unless one claims he is doing so. This is perhaps why God said "Fasting is mine" – because there is less possibility of showing off. Similarly, since nothing is to be done during fasting, there is no deed to be magnified in one's eyes; thus, it is less likely for man to gain false pride. Man can nonetheless feel arrogant as he finds the few hours of not eating and drinking a great deed worthy of a valuable reward. Thus, there is no guarantee and it needs care and attention.

C) Fasting dries the root of lust

Man can balance his instincts and put his animalistic desires under the control of his mind through fasting. Fasting disarms the ego. Sometimes a person who fasts has no desire of doing many things, especially in the state of hunger and thirst for an extended period of time. While it is possible to fast without getting excessively thirsty or hungry in some countries, fasts performed on long and hot summer days can make one very hungry and thirsty. In this state, man's animalistic tendencies become suppressed to an extent that one is unlikely to desire or have the power of thinking about worthless matters. As said in some narrations, the Prophet used to encourage youths to get married, and to fast if marriage was not possible for them.

D) Fasting can be performed in conjunction with other actions and has a lasting effect

The effect of fasting lasts throughout the day while performing other good actions. The direct effect of other deeds – such as reciting the Qur'an – is usually limited to the time it is being performed. Without a doubt, all deeds have a continual spiritual effect on man. However, this effect is not like the effect that exists at the time of performing that action. In other words, the direct and enormous effect of every deed is at the moment that it is being performed. For most of the acts of worship it is usually necessary to stop other activities to gain such an effect. This means most of the acts of worship and recommended acts are in the same rank as each other and therefore when one gets involved in another action he will no longer be able to continue performing the other previous act and reaping its benefit. For example, prayer is considered prayer and its effect is experienced as long as one does not do any conflicting deed besides it. When you begin doing another act, you are no longer performing prayer.

On the contrary, fasting does not have to be performed in exclusion of other acts of worship. In other words, fasting is not in the same rank as that of other acts; rather, it acts like a tool to help them. It does

not prevent other actions from being performed and thus its effect is not confined to a specific time. Its effect continues even while walking, talking at work, studying, and so forth. It is certainly possible to perform recommended prayers while walking, but there are many actions which cannot be done simultaneously. Indeed, fasting is considered to be a high level of remembrance of God which can be done even while playing with the children, communicating, or performing other daily actions.

The Qur'an describes a group of people as:

الَّذِينَ يَذْكُرُونَ اللَّهَ قِيَامًا وَقُعُودًا وَعَلَىٰ جُنُوبِهِمْ

“...those who remember God standing, sitting, and lying on their sides.” (Qur'an, 3:191)

Additionally, fasting stimulates a person's remembrance of God and is feasible for everyone. However, to achieve this level of remembrance through actions other than fasting where one is able to remember God while performing other actions can only be achieved after much preparation and perhaps at the final levels of perfection. Therefore, firstly, fasting has effects like weakening the animal side of man, and secondly, this effect persists even while performing other deeds. Thus, fasting guarantees a day free of evil for man and acts like a tool to strengthen one's faith throughout the day.

Furthermore, because the duration of this act of worship is long, it leaves a more lasting effect. One who takes heed of God's commands and restrains himself from forbidden actions all day long is affected greatly and gains more than one who performed a recommended action for, say, half an hour. Moreover, one keeps reaffirming the intention to obey the order of God through a period of one month, and this has a very powerful effect. Thus, fasting in the month of Ramadan is great in comparison to other acts of worship.

E) Fasting helps one speak less

Fasting has a direct effect on talking. A fasting person does not always have the energy to talk in excess, especially for useless things. Bear in mind, many of our problems are caused by saying things at the wrong time or place. The Prophet once said to a person who asked for advice, “Hold your tongue.” When the man repeated his question, again the Prophet said, “Hold your tongue. Does anything except the harvest of one's tongue put him into the Fire by one's face?” In another narration, Ma'adh ibn Jabal asked the Prophet, “Will we be questioned about our speech?” to which the Prophet replied, “Does anything except the harvest of one's tongue put him face first into the Fire?”⁸

Thus, with less talking, a more appropriate fast transpires, resulting in strengthening a person's faith and elevating him spiritually to strengthen his faith to eventually take him closer to God.

F) Fasting strengthens man's willpower

Another effect of fasting is that it enables man's will to become stronger. The first necessary requirements in approaching God and becoming proximate to Him are a strong will and good intentions. We recite in some of our supplications:

Indeed – oh my Lord – I know that the best provisions for a journey in your way are a firm determination, pure intention, and a truthful heart.[9](#)

In the supplication for the 27th of Rajab we also recite:

I know the best provision for the person who steps in your path, indeed, is a strong will with which he chooses You [over any other thing].[10](#)

In another supplication, we read:

A firm determination and a true and sincere word of your servant – ‘Oh my Lord’ – is enough for you. And You are where your servant considers You to be.[11](#)

It is impossible to achieve anything without a strong will. Sometimes a person wants to avoid sins but lacks the willpower to restrain himself when faced with certain situations. Believers are fond of good and dislike evil, as said in the Qur'an:

حَبَّبَ إِلَيْكُمُ الْإِيمَانَ وَزَيَّنَهُ فِي قُلُوبِكُمْ وَكَرَّهَ إِلَيْكُمُ الْكُفْرَ وَالْفُسُوقَ وَالْعِصْيَانَ

God has endeared faith to you and made it appealing in your hearts, and He has made hateful to you faithlessness, transgression and disobedience. (Qur'an 49:7)

It is due to our weak willpower that we face numerous problems. Ask any Muslim regarding sin, and they will show disdain for it; in spite of this, sins are committed, and this is caused by a lack of strong will.

Regarding Ayatullah Hujjat, Ayatullah Mutahhari shares an anecdote:

“He used to spend most of his time smoking cigarettes. When he got sick as a result, and went to Tehran for treatment, he was told by doctors to stop smoking, especially because it could cause pulmonary disease. At first he joked and said, ‘I use my lungs for smoking; why else would I need lungs?’ When the doctors told him it was truly harmful for his health, he was determined not to smoke anymore. With one firm decision, it was over [he never smoked again].”[12](#)

Fasting is one way to make your self-control stronger. For one month, a fasting person avoids pleasures such as eating and drinking primarily for the sake of Allah; as a result, his will is strengthened. God has also ordained hard *kaffarah* (an act of worship to be done to compensate for an unfulfilled obligation – in

this case fasting) to strengthen a person's will. Had it not been for this strictness, many would instantly break their fast. One who cannot avoid drinking tea or smoking for merely an hour and avoids it for the entire day for God's sake will definitely strengthen his will. This is a great capital that can motivate a person to achieve anything he wants.

In essence, persistence is the key to success:

وَأَنْ لَّوِ اسْتَقَامُوا عَلَى الطَّرِيقَةِ لَأَسْقَيْنَهُمْ مَاءً غَدَقًا

If they are steadfast on the path [of Allah], We shall provide them with abundant water... (Qur'an 72: 16)

Some scholars consider this water to represent knowledge and wisdom; and that this verse indicates that man can gain anything through persistence. It is said about Mulla Husaynquli Hamedani – a great mystic and the teacher of Ayatullah Qadi – that after a hard effort in journeying towards God through mysticism, he was not able to achieve anything. One day he saw a bird at the corner of his room attempting to eat a piece of dry bread. After trying perhaps close to a thousand tries, the bird finally managed to break a small piece of bread and eat it. Being moved by what he had seen, he suddenly realized that similar to the bird, he needed persistence, that he should not be disappointed too quickly, even after few years of effort. He continued his spiritual journey and reached a high level of mysticism. He then became an inspiration to many others.

Imam Ali said, "High courage and feasting do not go together."¹³ Being used to partying does not come together with having a strong will. One can either be a man of war or a man of partying.

G) Fasting improves man's power of contemplation

Another outcome of fasting is that it improves man's power of contemplation in helping him better comprehend. In the above- mentioned Hadith al-Mi'raj, hungriness results in wisdom, wisdom brings forth knowledge, and knowledge leads to certainty. The hadith continues: "When one gains certainty, he does not mind whether he lives an easy life or a difficult one."¹⁴ This implies that fasting – along with –

silence – is so significant that without it a person cannot step in the path of serving God. Moreover, fasting has such great impact on one's understanding and spirituality that it brings forth virtues such as wisdom, knowledge, certainty, and even satisfaction. Indeed, the latter part of the narration is derived from the verse:

وَأَعْبُدْ رَبَّكَ حَتَّى يَأْتِيَكَ الْيَقِينُ

“Worship your Lord until certainty comes to you” (15:99).

This is because fasting is the first part of worshipping and through a specific process, it results in certainty.

What is meant by the wisdom that fasting brings is not just knowledge; rather, it is a state in which the wise person considers all logical factors involved in cognition and does not yield to his emotions. Minimizing the effect of emotions on one hand and avoiding both intentional and unintentional fallacies on the other enables a person to increase his or her cognition and knowledge. In other words, what is meant by a wise person is not necessarily a person who has much knowledge; rather, it is the one who walks in the path of knowledge armed with patience and persistence and is not satisfied with anything less than proof or reasoning, does not heed to improper emotions, and puts all epistemological and psychological factors in their place. Thus, wisdom is the power of methodical gaining of knowledge; for this reason, it is introduced as a means of gaining knowledge as mentioned in the hadith.

With regard to how fasting brings wisdom, fasting increases the level of one's perception and helps sharpen the mind since it reduces distractions. It also weakens one's lust and harmful imagination which prevents the effect of emotions and other elements that logically should not bear on the process of understanding. In addition, God has special favour and support for true seekers of knowledge and this may work in ways we are aware of in ways we aren't.

As for the relation between knowledge and faith, knowledge and certainty are usually known to be identical although not in this case. According to Hadith al-Mi'raj, certainty is different from knowledge; it is only achieved after knowledge. Certainty here is not a firm verification of any matter that everyone – including the unfaithful – can achieve. This 'certainty' has four qualities:

1. It is prior to knowledge and cognition.
2. It is achievable for a person who has stepped in the path of servitude of God.
3. It brings about a kind of calmness and assurance; and because one does not worry or feel anxious when facing difficulties, he reaches such a level of spiritual capacity that difficulty and comfort do not make a difference to him.
4. The object of this certainty must be something specific because according to a well-known intellectual rule in the principles of jurisprudence, there must always be a relation or proportion between the subject and the predicate; as a result, here there must be a relation between being certain and not being affected by difficulties of one's life.

Considering that these four qualities are interconnected, certainty means the tranquillity and confidence which comes after knowledge under the light of belief and tendency towards religious truths. This confidence overcasts all aspects of man in such way that even his emotions are directed. Such a person

does not turn wild by pleasures or flustered by difficulties. Therefore, the last phrase of the narration, which implies that certainty requires inattention to difficulties and pleasures, is in line with the verse that advises people not to get upset because of losing or encountering problems¹⁵ and not to become overjoyed with achievements.¹⁶

In another phrase of Hadith al-Mi'raj, God says, "Oh Ahmad, it is desirable if you could taste the sweetness of hunger, solitude, silence and their effects." The Prophet asked, "Oh my Lord, what is the result of hunger?" God answered, "Wisdom, saving your heart (from temptations), proximity to me, being at ease among the people, honesty, and disregard for difficulty and joy."¹⁷ Every purposeful hunger is meant here, not merely that which is caused by fasting.

However, since fasting usually comes with hunger, it has these effects as well as benefits from other aspects of fasting as an obligation. It also seems that an ideal fast is a kind in which one feels hunger and thirst; otherwise, if a person does not feel the need to eat during the day due to, say, overeating, his achievements would be less.

Thus, the results of hunger while fasting as explained above are: a) wisdom, b) saving the heart from temptations, and having spiritual stability and steadiness, and c) gaining proximity to God by doing what He desires and gaining knowledge. In short, fasting strengthens a person's ability to avoid difficulties and any kind of unnecessary customs, to not being afraid of telling the truth, and to not care about difficulties and joy.

In one narration, God told Prophet David:

"Oh David, I put five things in five things but people look for them in other places and do not find them. I put knowledge in hunger and effort though people search for it in ease and being full, and thus they do not find it. I put honour in my obedience though they search it in serving the kings, and they do not find it. I put richness in contentment but they seek it in wealth, so they do not find it. I placed my pleasure in not being pleased of oneself but people seek it in their pleasure and do not find it. I put ease in Paradise but then again they search for it in this world and they do not find it."¹⁸

Imam Ali said, "Gluttony is in contradiction with intelligence and intellect."¹⁹ Just as feasting and war are opposed, gluttony and knowledge, cognition, and lack of faith, are similarly incompatible.

We humbly ask the merciful God to help us achieve His pleasure and enable us to get the maximum effect from fasting.

¹. Prophet Muhammad's ascension to heaven.

². Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 74, p. 27. The hadith reads as follows:

يا احمد ! ان العبادة عشر اجزاء : تسعة منها طلب الحلال... قال : " يا رب ! و " ما اول العبادة ؟ " قال : " اول العبادة الصمت و الصوم " . قال : " يا رب ! و ما ميراث الصوم ؟ قال : " الصوم يورث الحكمة ، و الحكمة تورث المعرفة ، و المعرفة تورث اليقين ، فاذا استيقن العبد لا يبالي كيف اصبح بعسر ام يسر

3. Wasa'il al-Shia, vol. 10, p, 164. The original Arabic text is as follows:

عن رسول الله ص انه قال في خطبة له و من صام شهر رمضان في انصات و سكوت و كف سمعه و بصره و لسانه و فرجه و جوارحه من الكذب و الحرام و الغيبة تقربا (قربه الله منه) حتى تمس ركبته ركبتى ابراهيم خليل الرحمن ع

4. Wasa'il al-Shia, vol. 7, p. 295. The original Arabic text is as follows:

قال رسول الله ص قال الله عز و جل : كل اعمال ابن آدم بعشرة اضعافها الى سبعة ضعف الا الصبر فانه اجزى به فثواب الصبر مخزون في علم الله و الصبر الصوم-

5. Wasa'il al-Shia, vol. 7, p. 118. The original Arabic text is as follows:

ليس الصيام من الطعام و الشراب غن لا يأكل الانسان و لا يشرب فقط و لكن اذا صمت فليصم سمعك و بصرك و لسانك و بطنك و فرجك و احفظ يدك و فرجك و اكثر السكوت الا من خير و ارفق بخادمك

6. Bihar al-Anwar, vol 77, page 85. The Arabic text is as follows:

يا ابا زر: يكفى من الدعاء مع البر ما يكفى الطعام من الملح-

7. Al-Kafi, vol. 2, pp. 352-353. The Arabic text is as follows:

ما يتقرب الى عبد من عبادي بشيء احب الى مما افترضت عليه و انه ليقترّب الى بالنافلة حتى احبه فاذا احببته كنت اذا سمع الذي يسمع و بصره الذي يبصر و يده التي يبطش بها - ان دعائي احببته و ان سألني اعطيته-

8. Warram Collection, volume 1, page 105

9. Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. 86, p. 318. The Arabic text is as follows:

اللهم و قد علمت ان افضل زاد الراحل اليك عزم ارادته و اخلاص نية و صادق طوية

10. Mafatih al-Jinan, Supplication of the 27th of Rajab. Arabic text is as follows:

و قد علمت ان افضل زاد الراحل اليك عزم اراده يختارك بها

11. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 15, p. 275. Arabic text is as follows:

يكفيك عزم اراده ان يقول العبد بنية صادقة و لسان صادق يا رب! فتكون عند ظن عبيدك بك

12. Spiritual Lectures, Sadra publications, 1991, p. 255.

13. (Nahj al-Balaghah, Fayd al-Islam edition, page 692, sermon 211) لا تتجمع عزيمة و وليمة

14. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 74, p. 27.

15. "So that you may not grieve for what escapes you nor for what befell you." (The Qur'an 3:153)

16. "So that you may not grieve for what escapes you, nor exult for what comes your way." (The Qur'an 57 :23)

17. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 77, p. 22. The Arabic text is as follows:

يا احمد ، لو ذقت حلوة الجوع و الصمت و الخلوة و ما ورثوا منها - قال: يا رب! ما ميراث الجوع؟ قال: الحكمة و حفظ القلب و التقرب الي و الحزن الدائم و خفة المؤونة بين الناس و قول الحق و لا يبالى عاش يبسر ام بعسر-

18. Ibid. vol. 78, p. 453. The Arabic text is as follows:

اوحى الله تعالى الى داود ع : يا داود! اني وضعت خمسة في خمسة و الناس يطلبونها في خمسة غيرها فلا يجدونها و وضعت العلم في الجوع و الجهد و هم يطلبونه في الشبع و الراحة فلا يجدونه و وضعت العز في طاعتي و هم يطلبون في خدمة السلطان فلا يجدونه و وضعت الغنى في القناعة و هم يطلبونه في كثرة المال فلا يجدونه و وضعت رضائ في سخط النفس و هم يطلبونه في رضا النفس فلا يجدونه و وضعت الراحة في الجنة و هم يطلبونه في الدنيا فلا يجدونها-

19. Mustadrak ul-Wasail, vol. 16, p. 221. Arabic text is as follows:

لا تتجمع الفطنة و البطنة

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