



THE ESSENCE OF FASTING

Fasting is a bounty, grace and gift of Allah Ta'ala to His slave. It has not been made obligatory for going without meals. It has been enjoined upon those who have faith so that they can attain the pleasure of Allah Ta'ala and become pious. It energizes the strength of servitude to Him. It is sustenance for the spiritual strength to be fortified.

Hujjatul Islam Hazrat Imam Ghazzali (Radiallahu Ta'ala Anh) states that there are three grades of fasting: the fast of common people, the fast of the pious and the fast of the ascetics. The fast of the common people is to refrain from eating, drinking and sexual intercourse and is the lowest form of fasting. The fast of the pious is, in addition to the abovementioned acts, to keep the hands, feet, sight, tongue and all other limbs of the body free from sin. The fast of the ascetics involves fasting of the mind. They refrain from all worldly activities and do not think of anything else except Allah Ta'ala and the hereafter. [*Ihya-ul-Uloom*]

The essence of fasting is stated in the Holy Qur'an in the following Verse wherein Allah Ta'ala states, "O Believers! Fasting has been made obligatory upon you as was made obligatory upon those before you, so that you may become pious. [*Surah 2, Verse 183*] Fasting therefore does not only entail the mere act of refraining from food, drink and sexual intercourse but is a means for us in restraining ourselves from sin and from the clutches of our nafs (lower self) and becoming pious.

According to Hazrat Data Ganj Bakhsh (Radiallahu Ta'ala Anh) hunger is a cause of trouble to the body but a source of life to the heart and soul. Eating to one's fill strengthens the stomach but hunger strengthens the inner and natural state. He who endeavours hard to strengthen the inner state is dearer and a special slave of Allah Ta'ala. He is protected against worldly worries and concerns. Hunger is the food of sincere men, religion of the disciples and the imprisonment of Shaitaan. [*Kashful Mahjoob*]

Hazrat Shaikh Yahya bin Ma'az (Radiallahu Ta'ala Anh) has stated, "When man is caught in the cobweb of greed for eating, the fire of lechery consumes him. Man's self is assailed by numerous sorts of diseases caused and spread by Shaitaan. So when man goes without food, he is busy curbing the lower self and desire with the help of abstention from food. The ills and evils bred in him by the lower self are not only lifeless but deadened, or are glutted by the singing flame of hunger. On the contrary, when man is engaged in eating his fill with extravagant food, the evil elements in him are revitalized and energized. Consequently, Shaitaan overpowers them." [*Awaariful Ma'arif*]

The act of eating to one's fill is like a canal of desire whereby Shaitaan passes through. Hunger is a canal, where angels make their appearance. Even merely a conscious person defeats Shaitaan, let alone the person engrossed in worshipful service. But Shaitaan embraces him who eats to his fill, even if he stands to worship, let alone while he is asleep. [*Awaariful Ma'arif*]

Rasoolullah (Sallallahu Alaihi Wasallam) is reported to have said, "The stomach of a hungry person is dearer to Allah than seventy wise pious people." Hazrat Shaikh Bishr Haafi (Radiallahu Ta'ala Anh) once said, "Hunger cleanses the heart of malice, kills desires, makes one the heir of the refinement of knowledge and reveals its mysteries." [*Kashful Quloob*]

The essence of fasting is to weaken the forces which are Shaitaan's means of leading us back to evil. It is therefore essential to cut down one's intake from what one would consume on a normal night, when not fasting. No benefit is derived from the fast if one consumes as much as one would usually take during the day and night combined. There is no receptacle more odious to Allah Ta'ala than a belly stuffed full with lawful food. Of what use is the fast as a means of conquering Allah Ta'ala's enemy and abating appetite, if at the time of Iftaar one not only makes up for all one has missed during the daytime, but also indulges in a variety of extra foods? It has become the custom these days to stock up for Ramadaan with all kinds of foods, and emphasis is placed so much on food that womenfolk spend most of their days preparing for Iftaar rather than making Ibaadat. A certain Saint of Allah Ta'ala once said that a sin is written for one whose efforts during the day are made only to prepare for breaking fast. [*Ihya-ul-Uloom*]

Eating ravenously diminishes the importance of fasting. Fasting basically aims at curbing the desire and the lower self, training them to observe temperance. This is how desire and the lower self are restrained, curbed, tamed and coached into meritorious habit of feeling content during fasting and observing temperance in food, controlling the tongue and restraining other behaviour for putting oneself into accord with Allah Ta'ala's will.

Hazrat Data Ganj Bakhsh (Radiallahu Ta'ala Anh) states, "The heart of the hungry is sharper and his instinct healthier and more purified than those of others, especially one who does not drink much water and cleanses the lower self with the help of spiritual endeavour. A hungry man's body is modest and heart humble and Allah fearing. Hunger kills the power of desires." [*Kashful Mahjoob*]

The faster should bring himself to the remembrance of Allah Ta'ala. He should not talk about other creatures and not indulge in profane gossip. He should not fight and abuse others; if he is beaten or abused by someone, he should not avenge himself on him. Forgiveness is a more meritorious act. Rasoolullah (Sallallahu Alaihi Wasallam) said, "When someone from amongst you keeps fast, he should neither use disrespectful language, nor should he talk ignorantly. In case someone abuses him, in response he should say that he is fasting." Rasoolullah (Sallallahu Alaihi Wasallam) said, "Five things destroy fasting: falsehood, back-biting, slander, perjury, and lustful gaze." In another Hadith Rasoolullah (Sallallahu Alaihi Wasallam) stated, "Fasting is a possession entrusted to the fasting person. So, every fasting person should protect his possession." Break your fast with whatever you have and show gratitude to Allah.

Hazrat Sufyaan Thauri (Radiallahu Ta'ala Anh) said, "The fasting person who slanders others gets his fast adulterated." Hazrat Shaikh Abu Talib Makki (Radiallahu Ta'ala Anh) is of the opinion that Allah Ta'ala has declared the acts like listening to lies and talking evil, synonymous and tantamount to eating out of forbidden as Allah Ta'ala states in the Holy Qur'an, "They are habitual listeners of lies, great devourers of the things forbidden." [*Surah 5, Verse 42*]

The Awliya Allah observe a mode of fasting which aims at nothing but seeking the pleasure of Allah. They observe fast with mutual harmony of the internal and external. To them the essence of fasting is to keep the outer limbs and internal organs away from sinfulness and transgression by putting restraint on imagination and mind, by developing internal and external control. Restraint should be put on the desire to have too much food for breaking fast.

May Allah Ta'ala grant us the Taufeeq to understand the true essence of Ramadaan and to focus our attention on Ibaadat and becoming pious rather than on food and worldly affairs, Ameen.