

# Fasting

The ultimate goal of the fast is to develop Taqwaa (consciousness of God) in humans, as Allah said, "...so that it may produce Taqwaa in you."<sup>1</sup> Taqwaa is among the highest moral qualities that a Muslim can attain. It is produced by placing a shield between one's self and Allah's wrath as the root meaning of the word implies (i.e. Taqwaa comes from the verb waqaa, which means 'to defend'). This is achieved by being conscious of Allah and all His commandments at all times, which means avoiding the Haram (prohibited) as well as the Makrooh (undesirable) and even some of the Halal (permissible) wherever doubt arises.

It has also been noted by medical experts that fasting improves the physical health in numerous ways. For example, during the fast the body uses up stored cholesterol (fats) which are often deposited in the blood system, as well as in other fatty areas of the body. Thus, it helps to keep the body firm and minimizes the danger of heart attacks.

## Fasting in Cultural Islam

Where fasting has become a ritual, the month of Ramadan becomes a time of celebration instead of religious contemplation and abstinence. Ramadan nights are nights of party and enjoyment which continue until the dawn in some countries. There, the night becomes the day and the day becomes the night. In most places, Suhoor (the light meal which is supposed to be taken prior the dawn) becomes a major three-course meal. Consequently, few experience real hunger during the fast. And at the time of breaking the fast, another three-course meal is taken, followed by a sampling of all kinds of sweets imaginable. As a result, many Muslims complain about gaining weight during Ramadan. The character which Sawm builds is :

a) controlled: Since fasting is basically abstinence from food, drink and sexual relations, it trains the believers in self-control. Consequently, the actual test of the effects of fasting occurs at the time of breaking the fast. When food is traditionally spread out in large delicious quantities and people are tempted to gorge themselves, the believer is required to control his or her appetite and have a light meal and drink prior to the sunset prayers. It was the practice of the Prophet (pbuh) to break his fast with three dates and water, and after the giving the sunset prayers eat a moderate meal.

Fasting also means spiritual abstinence. It is required that the individual give up not only food, drink and sexual relations, but also that he or she also restrain

from all forms of lying, backbiting, slander, etc. This is confirmed by the Prophet's (pbuh) statement,

“Allah has no need for the hunger and the thirst of the person who does not restrain from telling lies and acting on them even while observing the fast.”<sup>2</sup>

He also said, “When one of you is fasting, he should abstain from indecent acts and unnecessary talk, and if someone begins an obscene conversation or tries to pick an argument, he should simply tell him, ‘I am fasting.’”<sup>3</sup>

So, if one observes the fast according to the above principles, it should improve his moral character, making him more truthful and more careful about what he says and does.

b) moderate: Because the believer is required to restrain himself or herself at the time of breaking the fast, a sense of moderation in eating is developed. This is in keeping with the general recommendations given by the Prophet (pbuh) regarding eating. Ibn Umar Abu Hurayrah and Abu Musa both quoted Allah's Messenger (pbuh) as saying, “The believer eats in one stomach<sup>4</sup> and the disbeliever eats [as if] in seven.”<sup>5</sup>

Jaabir reported that the Prophet (pbuh) said, “Food for one person is sufficient for two, and food for two can suffice four.”<sup>6</sup>

Ibn Umar related that the Messenger of Allah (pbuh) forbade anyone from taking two dates at a time without the consent of his eating companions.<sup>7</sup>

c) compassionate: Fasting gives the individual a real taste of hunger and thirst, which helps him to realize the experience of the poor. This experience should instill a desire to want to help those who are less fortunate by sharing food and wealth with them. This quality is emphasized by the Eid al-Fitr festival of fast breaking in which all Muslims are obliged to give the needy food to celebrate on that day.

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1. The Quran, Chapter 2 (Surah al-Baqarah), Verse 183.

2. Reported by Abu Hurayrah and collected by al-Bukhaari (Sahih al-Bukhari (Arabic-English), vol.3, pp.70-1, no.127) and Abu Daawood (Sunan Abu Dawud (English Trans.), vol.2, p.648, no.2355)

3. Reported by Abu Hurayrah and collected by al-Bukhaari (Sahih al-Bukhari (Arabic-English), vol.3, p.71, 128), Muslim (Sahih Muslim (English Trans.), vol.2, p.558, no.2563) and Abu Daawood (Sunan Abu Dawud (English Trans.), vol.2, p.648, no.2356)

4. The Arabic term used is mi'an which literally means "intestine"
5. Sahih Muslim, vol. 3, p. 1137, no. 5113.
6. Sahih Muslim, vol. 3, p. 1136, no. 5111.7. Sahih Muslim, vol. 3, p. 1128, no. 5077