

The Inner Meaning of Fasting¹

by Syed Ali Ashraf

Fasting is both external and internal. External compulsory fasting is prescribed for all adult individuals during the lunar month of Ramaḍān. All such individuals must not eat, drink, smoke, or have sexual intercourse during daytime from dawn to sunset. Normal life is permitted from sunset to dawn. By internal fasting is meant the discipline imposed upon one's soul so that the self is restrained from indulging in passions and desires and prevented from engaging itself in evils, such as telling lies, backbiting, envy, jealousy, or pride. Another stage of internal fasting is had when the *muttaqī*, the God-fearing individual, abstains from even permitted things for fear of going beyond limits. The next and the highest stage of this kind of fasting is seen in those devoted adorers of God who see God and nothing else and fast from the presence of everything other than God.

It is to help an individual to proceed in the path of internal fasting that external fasting is prescribed. "Cultivate within yourself," says the Prophet, "the Attributes of God." Not to eat, drink, or engage in sex is to transcend the physical limitations of an individual and imitate the "habits" of God. Bodily passions and desires become thereby weakened. The spirit of man gains strength when he tries to obey God's orders and to restrain himself from those things that are prohibited by God. Unless he does so, physical abstentions alone cannot be counted as "fasting." Such restraint constitutes the minimum condition. Those who do not fulfill this minimum condition and indulge in morally evil acts, such as telling lies or backbiting, are the people about whom the Prophet has said, "There are many whose fasting is nothing beyond being hungry and thirsty." Both external and internal efforts are needed to fast properly. It is not an easy thing, for example, to control anger. In the month of fasting, this particular passion reaches almost beyond control because man becomes irritable. He must therefore keep constant watch over this and such other passions, so that not only are they properly controlled, but also they never gain the chance to control the individual. Otherwise our fasting will be soiled, and instead of acquiring benefits from external fasting we shall start committing sins.

The next stage of fasting is to abstain even from legally permitted things. Even when anger or revenge is justified, the individual restrains his anger and offers kindness instead; and instead of claiming justice, he invokes and showers mercy. Physically he limits his food and drink and sometimes abstains from those kinds of food that tempt him or energize physical passions, just to help his spirit have control over his temptations and passions. This kind of fasting gives man what in modern terminology is called "self-confidence," which in Sufi terminology will be called *taṭma'inn al-qulūb*, a peace that descends on the heart from above, giving the feeling that God has accepted this kind of fasting.

¹ Excerpt from the article: Syed Ali Ashraf. *The Inner Meaning of the Islamic Rites: Prayer, Pilgrimage, Fasting, Jihad*. Found in: Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. 2016. *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*. London and New York: Routledge. 247-249

To reach that stage of complete peaceful confidence (*iṭmiʿnān*) in which the self has surrendered wholly to God, the last type of fasting is necessary. It is a kind of fasting in which the individual abstains physically, mentally, and spiritually from anything that draws a veil between him and the Lord. God must become his only Beloved, his only goal, his only aim. If anything else absorbs his soul, this kind of fasting is immediately ruined and he has to start afresh to rouse within him the fullness of that craving and the freshness of that joy. It is with reference to this kind of fasting that God says in a *ḥadīth qudsī*, “Fasting is for Me and I shall grant reward for it Myself.”

The two joys of fasting that, according to the Prophet, a person fasting is blessed with—*iftār* (breaking the fast) and the vision of the new moon (of ʿīd after the month of Ramaḍān)—refer to two other joys, the joy of seeing *Jannah* (paradise) after death and the joy of having the vision of God after resurrection.