

Why Do Muslims Fast?¹

by Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Certain truths are by nature evident and need not be discussed in normal circumstances. But, in a day and age when the most evident truths are shrouded by the clouds of doubts and questioned, one is forced to discuss even the most obvious of them. One such truth is the necessity for an ascetic element in human life. Without an element of self-denial and asceticism no religion and therefore no human culture is possible. One must withdraw occasionally from the full life of the senses even in order to be able to enjoy the fruit of sensual perception. As the Taoist saying affirms, it is the empty space of the wheel which makes the wheel. It is only a certain degree of restraint from the material objects of the senses that makes even the life of the senses balanced, not to speak of making possible an opening in the human soul for the spiritual life.

One such practice of restraint is fasting, promulgated in Islam as obligatory for the month of Ramadan and recommended for other periods of the year. As the Holy Quran asserts, it is a practice which existed in older religions and in Islam it was only revived and institutionalised in the form of the *sawm* of Ramadan. Fasting during this month possesses, of course, many social and external benefits and features which have been discussed often and in fact even somewhat overemphasised in certain quarters, where the chief virtue of fasting is reduced to charity towards the poor. This element of charity is, of course, there but like all true charity it becomes spiritually significant only when it is directed towards God. And in fasting it is the obeying of the Divine Will which has as its fruit charity towards the poor and the needy and an actual participation in their hunger and thirst.

But the most difficult aspect of the fast is the edge of the sword of abstention directed toward the carnal soul, the *al-nafs al-ammara* of the Holy Quran. In fasting, the rebellious tendencies of the carnal soul are gradually dampened and pacified through a systematic submission of these tendencies to the Divine Will, for at every moment of hunger the soul of the Muslim is reminded that it is in order to obey a Divine Command that the passions of the carnal soul go unheeded. That is also why the fast does not include only food but also abstention from every form of lust and carnal passion.

As a result of this systematic restraint, the human soul becomes aware that it is independent of its immediate natural environment and conscious that it is in this world but not of it. A person who fasts with complete faith becomes aware very rapidly that he is a pilgrim in this world and that he is created as a creature destined for a goal beyond this material existence. The world about him loses somewhat its materiality and gains an aspect of 'vacuity' and transparency which in the case of the contemplative Muslim leads directly to a contemplation of God in His creation.

The ephemeral and 'empty' nature of things is, moreover, compensated by the appearance of those very things as Divine gifts. Food and drink which are taken for granted throughout the

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year reveal themselves during the period of fasting more than ever as gifts of heaven (*ni'mah*) and gain a spiritual significance of a sacramental nature.

To fast is also to wear the armour of purity against the passions of the world. It is to incorporate even 'physically' in one's body the purity of death which is of course coupled with spiritual birth. In fasting, man is reminded that he has chosen the side of God over the world of passions. That is why the Holy Prophet loved fasting so much. It was a basic element of that 'Muhammadan spiritual poverty' (*faqr*), about which he said, '*al-faqr fakhri*' (spiritual poverty is my glory).

This death of the passions cleanses the human soul and empties it of the putrid water of its negative psychic residues. The individual and through him the Islamic community is renovated through this rite and reminded of its moral and spiritual obligations and goals. That is why the arrival of the blessed month is greeted with joy. For in it the doors of heaven are opened further for the faithful and the Divine Compassion descends upon those who seek it. To have completed the fast of Ramadan is to have undergone a rejuvenation and rebirth which prepares each Muslim to face another year with determination to live and act according to the Divine Will. The fast also bestows a spiritual perfume upon the human soul whose fragrance can be perceived long after the period of abstinence has come to an end. It provides for the soul a source of energy upon which it feeds throughout the year. The holy month has therefore been called 'the blessed', *mubarak*, one in which the grace or *barakah* of God flows upon the Islamic community and rejuvenates its deepest sources of life and action.