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FASTING IN EARLY SUFI LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an analysis of conceptions of fasting in early Islamic spirituality. By drawing on the literature of Sufism, with special attention to the writings of al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988), al-Makkī (d. 386/996), al-Kharkūshī (= Khargūshī; d. 407/1016), al-Hujwīrī (d. *ca*. 465/1071), al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) and al-Sīrjānī (d. 470/1077), it thematically outlines (1) the value placed on fasting in early tradition, (2) the dangers believed to lie in the practice, and finally, (3) the need to transcend, in the final scheme of things, any attachment one may form with it, through 'detachment from detachment'. In the process, the article aims not only to decipher and make sense of the various aphorisms and stories that make up the early literature of *taṣawwuf*, but also to resolve their apparent contradictions.

INTRODUCTION

In Plato's *Phaedo* we encounter a dialogue between Socrates and Cebes around the nature of the soul and its relation to the body. The soul we learn is divine-like, deathless, intelligent, uniform, indissoluble and of course invisible, while the body in contrast is mortal, multiform, changing, soluble and visible. If the body gains mastery over the soul it is bound to drag it down into the sludge and sediment of the lower, material world through the tentacles of desire, and embroil it in confusion and dizziness. On the other hand, if the soul frees itself from the allure of the transient pleasures offered to it by the senses, and in turn gains mastery over the body by assuming its proper and naturally ordered relation to it, then the soul will be prepared for its own inevitable departure and ascent, and thereby, its eternal felicity. Philosophy for

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Socrates is therefore not simply an exercise in thinking, but more importantly, it is a preparation for dying, and this preparation can only be obtained through catharsis or making the soul pure.[1]

While it would be a mistake to trace the origin of a universal idea such as the soul–body distinction to Plato (or for that matter his teacher), the distinction is perhaps most famously attributed to him—at least in the history of Western thought.[2] More importantly, for our purposes, a belief in the dichotomy of the soul and body and the consequent tension between the two elements of the human personality has often served as the basis for ascetic, self-abnegating forms of religious piety in many of the world's religions.

The fundamental soul–body and by extension matter–spirit distinction has historically assumed a variety of forms. Some like the Manicheans and heretical Gnostics saw matter, physicality and the body as inherently evil. This strain of thinking can be found in milder form even in the sayings of the desert fathers of the early Church, balanced, no doubt, by certain theological doctrines such as the Incarnation which could not allow the flesh to be relegated to an entirely diabolical order. Islam has generally taken a tempered approach to this question. In the Qurʾān, the material world is sometimes described pejoratively as *al-dunyā*, insofar as it distracts the human being from God and stands at the lowest rung of the cosmic hierarchy.[3] The Arabic word after all comes from a trilateral root which means 'to be low' or 'behave despicably', and may also refer to being vile.[4] But Muslim scripture also uses the more positive term,

[1] Plato, *Phaedo* (transl. G. M. A Grube; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1977), 79–81.

[2] There is no need to repeat Whitehead's famous remark about his influence on later Western thought. For a concise treatment of the doctrine of the soul among both Plato's predecessors and successors, see Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas* (transl. Willard R. Trask; Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 3 vols., 1978–85), ii. 197–202.

[3] In the Qurʾān, we encounter such verses as, *Wealth and children are adornments of the life of this* dunyā, *but the good deeds that last are better* (Q. 18:46); *O My people, the love of the life of this* dunyā *is but a passing comfort, while the hereafter is everlasting* (Q. 40:39); *These are nothing but comforts of the life of this* dunyā, *but the hereafter with your Lord is for the righteous* (Q. 43:35); and *Know that the life of this* dunyā *is but play, idle talk, pageantry and mutual boasting among yourselves* (Q. 57:20). The same belittling of the *dunyā* appears in the ḥadīth literature, such as the tradition where the Prophet said, 'What is the *dunyā* to me, and what am I to the *dunyā*? My relation to it is like that of a rider who seeks the shade of a tree, then moves on and leaves it behind'. *Musnad* of Aḥmad, no. 3701.

[4] The *dunyā* (feminine elative) is not only that which is 'near' or 'nearer', but also 'lower' or 'lowest in value'. Elsaid M. Badawi and Muhammad Abdel-Haleem,

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al-arḍ,[5] when it highlights its role as a locus of God's self-revelations and signs (*āyāt*).[6] In other words, the world-below is simultaneously a veil and a theophany in that it both reveals and conceals the Sacred, with either one of these possibilities contingent on one's own orientation towards it. In similar vein, the realm of the body may either be conceived of as an impediment to the spiritual life insofar as it enchains the soul to passion (*shahwa*) and entices it to the disobedience of divine commandments, or it can conversely open it up to an experience of the Holy through an encounter with the plethora of lawful material blessings that surround the human being, to which the Qurʾān frequently calls attention, and through which the soul may obtain a foretaste of the delights of the world to come.[7]

Arabic–English Dictionary of Quranic Usage (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 314–15. See also al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Mufradāt alfāẓ al-Qurʾān* (ed. Najīb al-Mājidī; Beirut: al-Maktaba al-ʿAṣriyya, 2009), 'd–n–w'. The elative *adnā* may be contrasted with *khayr* (literally that which is 'good' or 'better') as in the Qurʾānic verse, *Would you exchange the* adnā *for that which is* khayr*?* (Q. 2:61). Lane notes that this form may also refer (among its other meanings) to what is 'ignoble', 'base', 'vile' and 'mean'. *Arabic–English Lexicon*, 'd–n–w'.

[5] According to Lane, the verbal root ʾ–r–ḍ, when used in relation to its derivative *arḍ* ('earth', 'land'), as in the expression *aruḍati l-arḍ*, means, 'the land became thriving, or productive'. It may also mean, 'it [the *arḍ*] became pleasing to the eye and disposed by nature to yield good produce;' 'it became fruitful, and in good condition;' 'it collected moisture, and became luxuriant with herbage;' 'it became soft to tread upon, pleasant to sit upon, productive, and good in its herbage or vegetation'. And in relation to a person, ʾ–r–ḍ can mean that he became 'disposed to do good'. *Arabic–English Lexicon*, 'ʾ–r–ḍ'.

[6] Thus, we encounter such verses as, *And among his signs* (āyāt) *is that the heavens and the* arḍ *stand firmly by His command* (Q. 30:25); *And We have not created the heavens and the* arḍ*, and what is between them, except to manifest the Truth* (Q. 15:85); *[He is the One] who made the* arḍ *a resting place for you, and the sky a canopy, and He sent down rain from the sky, causing fruits to grow as provision for you* (Q. 2:22); and *He it is who spread out the* arḍ*, and placed therein firm mountains and hills, and made fruit of every kind in pairs* (Q. 13:3).

[7] While the question of how easily Platonism or its various offshoots can be reconciled with Islamic doctrine has been a subject of robust debate, clearly many of the greatest thinkers of premodern Islam found there to be a deep affinity between the worldview of the Qurʾān and some of Plato's fundamental insights into the nature of reality, whether it involved a belief in knowledge as recollection (*anamnesis*), the supreme principle (= the 'Good') as a reality beyond all multiplicity, or the body as a container for the soul. Were that not the case, it is unlikely that he would have been honorifically referred to not just as *aflāṭūn*, but *aflāṭūn al-ilāhī*, the 'divine Plato', by many classical Muslim thinkers. Even Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240), who had no particular appreciation for *falsafa* understood in the conventional sense, and who could be quite critical of the Greek-inspired Islamic philosophers,

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When we turn toward the specific question of Islamic attitudes towards the consumption of food and drink as embodied in the *sunna*, what we find from the source material may best be described as a moderate asceticism. While it is well-known that the Prophet appreciated good and wholesome food when it was offered to him, and that he used this appreciation as a way to teach his disciples the value of gratitude, his custom tilted towards frugality. As Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī would observe in the *Nourishment of Hearts* (*Qūt al-qulūb*), he would go hungry not out of compulsion but choice,[8] and there are numerous traditions attributed to the Prophet which underscore the corrosive effects of eating beyond one's needs.[9] Once a Companion belched crudely in his presence, leading him to warn, 'those most satiated in this world will be hungriest in the next'.[10] On another occasion, he pointed towards the plump belly of a man. 'If this were on another', he counseled, 'it would be better for you', by which he meant, according to Makkī, that it would be better to privilege others over yourself.[11] To these we may add the numerous traditions which highlight the protective, illuminating power of hunger. One ḥadīth runs, 'Whoever feels in himself a passionate urge to sin, should slay it with hunger and thirst'.[12] And in another we read, 'fasting

would write of him in the *Meccan Revelations*, 'if they had only tasted the states—like the divine Plato among the sages'. The favourable allusion here was of course to what were believed to be the mystical or even quasi-revelatory foundations of his own doctrines. William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 203. On Ibn al-ʿArabī's attitude towards philosophy, see Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn ʿArabī* (transl. Peter Kingsley; Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 105–9. On the mystical element in ancient Greek philosophy, see Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery and Magic: Empedocles and the Pythagorean Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

[8] Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb fī muʿāmalat al-maḥtūb wa-waṣf ṭarīq al-murīd ilā maqam al-tawḥīd* (ed. Saʿīd Nasīb Makārim; Beirut: Dār al-Ṣādir, 2 vols., 1995), ii. 325.

[9] One may begin with the *Kitāb al-Ṣawm* of Bukhārī and the *Kitāb al-Ṣiyām* of Muslim, before turning to other collections.

[10] Makkī, *Qūt*, ii. 325; cf. Ibn Mājah, no. 3351. See also, Kharkūshī, *Tahdhīb al-asrār fī uṣūl al-taṣawwuf* (ed. Syed Muhammad ʿAlī; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2006), 145.

[11] Makkī, *Qūt*, ii. 325; cf. Ṭabarānī, *al-Muʿjam al-kabīr*, no. 2140.

[12] Abū al-Ḥasan al-Sīrjānī (d. 1077), *Sufism, Black and White: a critical edition of Kitāb al-Bayāḍ wa-l-sawād* (eds. Bilal Orfali and Nada Saab; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 147 [#312]. A similar tradition runs, 'Verily Satan flows through the son of Adam as blood flows, so constrict his flow through hunger and thirst', Makkī, *Qūt*, ii. 326; Gerhard Böwering, *The Comfort of Mystics: A Manual and Anthology*

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is a shield'.[13] So proverbial was the restraint of the Prophet with respect to food that ʿĀʾisha his youngest wife complained, 'the first innovation (*bidʿa*) introduced after the death of the Messenger of God was satiety (*shabʿ*)'.[14] It was this same propensity towards minimalism that became the basis for the Prophet's own practice of regularly fasting, so much so that the days on which he fasted outnumbered all others.[15] 'Everything has a door' he once said, 'and the door of devotional worship (*ʿibāda*) is the fast'.[16] He also stated, 'patience is half of faith', and 'half of patience lies in the fast'.[17]

HUNGER AND FASTING IN EARLY ISLAM

The early Sufis and their spiritual progenitors[18] gained renown in later history for the seriousness with which they took on the practice of

of Early Sufism (a critical Arabic text edition of Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī [d. *ca.* 1077], *Salwat al-ʿārifīn wa-uns al-mushtāqīn*; eds. Böwering and Bilal Orfali; Leiden: Brill, 2013; hereafter: *Salwat*), 109; ʿImād al-Dīn al-Umawī, *Ḥayāt al-qulūb fī kayfiyyat al-wuṣūl ilā al-maḥbūb*, on the margins of the reprint (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.) of Makkī's *Qūt* (originally published Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Maymūniyya, 1892) ii. 8. See Muslim, no. 2174 (for the first path of the ḥadīth).

[13] Bukhārī, no. 1904; Ibn Mājah, no. 1639. The tradition appears frequently in early and later Sufi texts on fasting and hunger.

[14] Makkī, *Qūt*, ii. 327; cf. Abū Bakr Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, *Kitāb al-jūʿ* (ed. Musʿad ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Muḥammad al-Saʿanī; Cairo: Maktabat al-Qurʾān, 2002), 22.

[15] ʿImād al-Dīn, *Ḥayāt*, ii. 9.

[16] Makkī, *Qūt*, ii. 332.

[17] Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī, *ʿAwārif al-maʿārif* (eds. ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd b. al-Sharīf; Cairo: Maktabat al-Īmān, 2005), 346. Cf. Tirmidhī, no. 3519.

[18] While it remains difficult to identify the precise origins of Sufism as a distinct historical phenomenon, there has been a trend among some scholars to trace it to Junayd (d. 910) and the rise of the school of Baghdad. According to proponents of this view, the spiritual progenitors of these Baghdadis are better classified not as Sufis but proto-Sufis, not as Sufis but early Muslim ascetics and mystics. While I have generally followed this distinction in the ensuing analysis, any rigidity on the question seems, in my view, unwarranted, and overlooks disagreements among competent specialists (including those writing outside of the boundaries of the Euro-American academy) on the precise nature of the development and unfolding of the early tradition, as well as on ancillary issues related to terminology (such as whether 'mysticism', within its own unique history in the study of religion, functions as an accurate category to denote the phenomenon we typically identify as *taṣawwuf*). My approach, in the absence of consensus, is to adopt a certain measure of flexibility with respect to terms ('ascetic', 'mystic', 'ascetic-mystic',

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fasting.[19] According to the prevailing view, the importance attached to the exercise was at least partly rooted in a reaction to the luxurious and even excessive lifestyles that emerged out of the wealth that was brought into the heartlands of the Muslim world. After all, no more than a few decades had elapsed following the Prophet's death when the Islamic Empire had managed to conquer Persia and a large part of Byzantine territory. By the end of the seventh century, Muslim rule extended over such major historical cities as Alexandria, Ctesiphon, Jerusalem and Damascus. A community whose very existence had on more than one occasion come close to being threatened with extinction now wielded unprecedented power over vast swathes of land from Africa to Asia, and soon Europe, with astonishing riches at its disposal. The effects of the treasures that flowed in on everyday life, for many of the early believers, including the Companions themselves, betrayed the simplicity encouraged by the *sunna*. It was only natural therefore that a counter-movement would emerge that stressed the necessity of cultivating renunciation or detachment (*zuhd*)[20] by highlighting these seemingly forgotten qualities of the early community, and of course its founder.[21] While early Islamic modes of piety were certainly influenced by the religious

'Sufi', 'proto-Sufi'), recognizing the advantages and limitations of each of them. Needless to say, an inquiry into this issue lies outside of the scope and aims of the present article, and the literature on these debates is too vast to include in a footnote.

[19] For a survey of fasting in Sufism, see Valerie J. Hoffman, 'Eating and fasting for God in the Sufi tradition', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 63/3 (1995): 465–84. Of more immediate relevance to the present study is Arin Salamah-Qudsi's helpful article, 'The spiritual culture of food: eating customs in early Sufism', *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 72/4 (2019): 419–36; cf. Richard Gramlich, *Weltverzicht: Grundlagen und Weisen islamischer Askese* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997), 222–49. See also Eyad Abuali, 'I tasted sweetness, and I tasted affliction': pleasure, pain, and body in medieval Sufi food practices', *The Senses and Society*, 17/1 (2022): 52–67; and n. 92 below.

[20] On the early ascetics, see Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 1–7; Christopher Melchert, *Before Sufism: Early Islamic Renunciant Piety* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020); and Sara Sviri, *Perspectives on Early Islamic Mysticism: The World of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī and his Contemporaries* (London: Routledge, 2020), 37–57. See also the excellent essay by Gavin N. Picken, 'al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī and spiritual purification between asceticism and mysticism' in Lloyd Ridgeon (ed.), *Routledge Handbook on Sufism* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 17–31, and Ridgeon's very useful introductory chapter on Sufism's origins, 3–16.

[21] For more on this question, as well as alternative (occasionally overlapping) theories on the historical formation of Sufism, see Alexander Knysh, 'How and why Sufism came to be' in *Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 15–34 (ch. 1).

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traditions of those over whom Muslims came to rule, this influence should not be overstated. In particular, the tendency to trace Islamic asceticism to earlier Christian practice—characteristic of much of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European scholarship—may well reflect medieval Western caricatures of Islam as a faith that encouraged licentiousness and an indulgence in the pleasures of the flesh.[22] It also ignores the well-documented, tempered ascetic currents in the personality of the Prophet himself.[23]

The stories and aphorisms about hunger (*jūʿ*) and fasting (*ṣawm*) in proto- and early Sufism are numerous, and form most of the content of early literary productions on the subject. 'The key to this world is satiety', declared Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī (d. 830),[24] 'while the key to the next world is hunger'.[25] And Yaḥyā b. Muʿādh (d. 872) said, 'if hunger

[22] For medieval conceptions of Islam's espousal of hedonism, see Norman Daniel's classic study, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1960), esp. 158–85 ('The place of self-indulgence in the attack on Islam'). See also Sophia R. Arjana, *Muslims in the Western Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 32–7, 99–102, 161–3, and other relevant sections. On the historical context behind early Orientalist misconceptions of Sufism, and their genealogical transmission to later scholars, see Atif Khalil and Shiraz Sheikh, 'Editorial introduction: Sufism in Western scholarship, a brief overview', *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, 43/3 (2014): 355–70.

[23] Although we should note that this moderate asceticism excluded celibacy, presenting us with a unique form of renunciation. Tor Andrae's claim that if celibacy is the first commandment of the mystic life, then fasting is the second, while applicable to medieval Christian piety, cannot properly be applied to Islam. *In the Garden of Myrtles: Studies in Early Islamic Mysticism* (transl. Birgitta Sharpe; Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1987), 52. Thus, we can read, for example, in later tradition Ibn al-ʿArabī recount the story of a saintly man who despite his renunciation could not live outside of married life, with such a state not negating his piety in the least, neither in the eyes of the Andalusian mystic nor others who knew him. *Sufis of Andalusia: the* Ruḥ al-quds *and al-Durrat al-fākhirah of Ibn ʿArabī* (transl. R. W. J. Austin; London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971), 96.

[24] Hujwīrī wrote about him, 'He was held in honor by the Ṣúfí¨s and was (called) the sweet basil of hearts (*rayḥān-i dilhā*)'. *Kashf al-Maḥjūb: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism* (transl. Reynold A. Nicholson; Lahore: Islamic Book Service, repr. 1992), 112.

[25] Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya* (eds. ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd b. Sharīf; Damascus: Dār al-Farfūr, 2002), 283; Ṭabarī, *Salwat*, 109; Kharkūshī, *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, 145. A partial English edition of Qushayrī's text was produced by Barbara von Schlegell (1990), with full translations following later by Rabia T. Harris (1997) and then Alexander Knysh (2007). While I have liberally made use of them for my work with Qushayrī in the present article, the translations that follow are my own.

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were sold in the marketplace, it would not be necessary for the seeker of the next life, were he to enter it, to buy anything else'.[26] And yet another authority said, 'God does not speak to anyone while there remains in his belly a share of this world'. The sweetness of divine communication, it was implied, comes only through an empty stomach.[27] Then there is the saying ascribed to one of the learned ones (ulema), that 'the most detestable of things to God is a full belly, though it be of lawful food and drink'.[28] We also encounter a tale of John the Baptist where he once asked Satan, 'when are you are most capable of your carrying out your work?' He replied, 'when a man eats and drinks to his fill'. On hearing the reply, we are told, John never filled his stomach again.[29] The value attached to hunger would lead Junayd to categorically declare, 'Fasting is half of the Way'.[30] Indeed, so closely was it associated with piety in early Islam that we find a tale that underscores this in the early literature about Ruwaym (d. 915). On a scorching hot day in Baghdad, and after some travel, he made his way to a stranger's home to ask for water. In keeping with Near Eastern hospitality, a new jug with cold drink was promptly sent out for the thirsty man. No sooner did the servant girl notice for whom she was to bring to water, she cast the jug aside in astonishment. 'Woe unto you!' she cried, 'A Sufi who drinks in the day?!' Ruwaym was so embarrassed by the episode, and at what was in effect a divine rebuke through the servant girl, he vowed never to pass a day without fasting.[31]

In his *Book of Flashes* (*Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*), Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj presents us with one of the most intriguing explanations for the significance of the fast. In his commentary on the divine report (*ḥadīth qudṣī*) with which he opens his chapter, 'The fast is Mine, and its reward lies with Me' (*al-ṣawm lī wa-anā ajzī bihi*),[32] he draws attention to two levels of meaning

[26] Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 282; Sīrjānī, *Bayāḍ*, 147–8. For more on Yaḥyā b. Muʿādh, see Fritz Meier, *Abū Saʿīd-i Abū l-Ḫayr* (*357–440/967–1049*): *Wirklichkeit und Legende* (Tehran: Bibliothèque Pahlavi, 1976), 148–84.

[27] Makkī, *Qūt*, ii. 332–3.

[28] Ibid, 327.

[29] Ṭabarī, *Salwat*, 112 [#177].

[30] Hujwīrī, *Kashf*, 320.

[31] For biographical details about Ruwaym, see Hujwīrī, *Kashf*, 135–6; Bū Nuʿaym al-Iṣfahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyāʾ wa-ṭabaqāt al-aṣfiyāʾ* (ed. Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭāʾ; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 12 vols., 2002), x. 315–20; Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* (ed. Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭāʾ (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2003), 147–51. For a survey of the source material, see Richard Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder des Sufitums* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2 vols., 1995–1996), i. 447–82.

[32] For a slight variant, see Bukhārī, no. 1904; Muslim, no. 1151.

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in the tradition.[33] First of all, since the fast is the only act of devotional worship that involves abstention from an act, unlike every other form of religious activity, the faster or *ṣāʾim* is marked by a special kind of sincerity in that his religiosity remains concealed from the eyes of others. The nature of the act—*ʿibāda bi-ghayr ḥarakat al-jawāriḥ*, 'a worshipful act free of bodily movement'—confers upon the one who undertakes it a certain measure of protection from ostentation or hypocrisy, since there is nothing to show nor to be seen. 'The fast is Mine', argues Sarrāj, because no one sees it but God alone. Second, since the fast involves not only the absence of an act, but also withholding oneself from what nourishes the natural constitution of the body, it allows the *ṣāʾim* to participate, in a way that corresponds to his own mode of existence, in God's own independence and self-sufficiency, in His quality of *ṣamadiyya*, and therefore paradoxically in divine transcendence. When the faster forgoes food and drink, thereby overcoming the most elemental needs of the body, he becomes divine-like through a participation in God's own freedom from want, since after all He neither eats nor drinks. The *ṣawm* is therefore the only act that allows the human being to experience and take part in the otherness of God, in a nature that remains eternally qualified by independence.[34] In addition, the reward that God has in store for the fast transcends human imagination because the act itself transcends acts, and because it involves the assumption of a divine quality, in this case of transcendence through *ṣamadiyya* or participation in the divine name *al-Ṣamad* ('The Self-Sufficient').[35] Moreover, the

[33] Abū Bakr al-Ṣarrāj, *Kitāb al-lumaʿ fī al-taṣawwuf* (ed. Kāmil Muṣtafā al-Hindāwī; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2001), 152–3.

[34] Sarrāj was not alone in this view. To quote Hujwīrī, 'fasting is a mystery unconnected with any external thing, a mystery in which none other than God participates': *Kashf*, 320.

[35] While in an abstract theological sense *ṣamad* refers to divine self-sufficiency, its more concrete meaning, according to Sarrāj, points 'to one who has no *jawf*', i.e., no belly, stomach, cavity, or hollowness. Thus, such a one 'neither has a need for food nor drink': *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*, 151. The same definition appears in Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), ascribed to numerous early authorities: *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān*, on Q. 112:2. Conversely, in the ḥadīth literature, one of the salient qualities of the human being is his interior cavity, emptiness, or hollowness, his *ajwaf* (from the same j–w–f root). We are told that when God created Adam, Satan encircled him, so that 'when he saw he was hollow, realized he was created without self-control': Muslim, no. 2611. In another ḥadīth, the Prophet spoke of the 'two hollow cavities' (*ajwafān*) that lead to the Fire: the mouth and the genitalia: Ibn Mājah, no. 4246. See Stefan Sperl's remarks on these two traditions, 'Man's "Hollow Core": ethics and aesthetics in *Ḥadīth* literature and classical Arabic *adab*', *Bulletin of the SOAS*, 70/3 (2007): 459–86, at 461–2; cf. Roy Vilozny,

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reward has no limit, since the act, being the absence of an act, itself has no limit, and also because the *ṣāʾimūn* (fasters) are *ṣābirūn* (patient), and 'the *ṣābirūn* will receive their rewards without limits' (Q. 39:10)—hence the final refrain of the divine report, 'and its reward lies with Me'.[36]

The unique relation between fasting and patience, also highlighted in the ḥadīth cited earlier ('half of patience lies in the fast'), would be developed by a number of early figures. Patience or *ṣabr* after all in its most elemental sense is *ḥabs al-nafs*, that is to say, 'holding the soul back', and the objects of this self-restraint are the passions, desires, internal proclivities and natural inclinations detrimental to the soul's well-being.[37] When we consider that there is perhaps no devotional act that so comprehensively entails as intense and disciplined a regimen of *ḥabs al-nafs*—not only with respect to food, drink and sexuality, but also impure speech, the glance, and the auditory faculties—then we can appreciate why fasting is an exercise above all else in patience. After all, the fast renders what is usually allowed prohibited, and what is usually prohibited *even more* prohibited. This leads Hujwīrī to observe that the abstinence of the fast entails 'many obligations' which involve not only 'keeping the belly without food and drink', but also 'guarding the eye from lustful looks, and the ear from listening to evil speech about anyone in his absence, and the tongue from vain or foul words, and the body from following after worldly things and disobedience to God'. Only

'The book of foods: a third/ninth century Imāmī–Shīʿī guide to eating', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 52 (2022): 345–68, at 345–7. On the history of Western scholarly debates on the meaning of *ṣamad*, a Qurʾanic *hapax legomenon*, see Walid A. Saleh, 'The etymological fallacy and Qurʾānic studies: Muhammad, paradise, and late antiquity' in Angelika Neuwirth *et al.* (eds.), *The Qurʾān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qurʾānic Milieu* (Leiden: Brill, 2010): 644–98, at 654–8.

[36] Ṣarrāj, *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*, 151–2. In later tradition, we find a curious application of this insight into the nature of the fast in a debate in Islamic jurisprudence. In his *Supreme Scale* (*al-Mīzān al-kubrā*), Shaʿrānī (d. 1565) notes that among those who inclined towards the view that the use of the *miswāk* was permissible during the fast, one group argued that because the fast involves participation in a *ṣifa ṣamadāniyya*, it requires remaining free—like God Himself—of human imperfections, blemishes, and impurities, in both the sensorial and spiritual dimensions of the human being. Just as the fasting person must refrain free of foul and pungent speech, such as backbiting, slander and lying, he should also strive to keep himself free of foul and pungent odours. See *al-Mīzān al-kubrā* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2 vols., [1995] 2001), ii. 26.

[37] Cf. Makkī, *Qūt*, i. 394 (chapter on *ṣabr*). In al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī's lexicon of Qurʾānic vocabulary, he defines patience as 'holding the soul back (from what it desires) in light of what is demanded of it by the intellect, religious law, or both'. *Mufradāt alfāẓ al-Qurʾān*, s.v. 'ṣ–b–r'.

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then, writes the author of *Unveiling of the Veiled* (*Kashf al-mahjūb*), 'is [one] truly keeping his fast', just as the Prophet, notes Hujwīrī, explicitly declared in a number of traditions. Drawing on a line of reasoning similar to Sarrāj, the Persian author also notes the paradoxical participation in the 'mystery' of divine transcendence facilitated by the fast, as well as the everlasting perpetuation of its reward due to its unique standing among the varieties of devotional worship. In fact, he suggests that while the entry into Paradise of the faithful will be brought about through divine mercy, and their ranks of the afterlife conferred upon them as a reward for pious deeds, the fast will facilitate their abiding therein forever.[38]

ON THE BENEFITS OF HUNGER AND FASTING

For the early Sufis and their progenitors, there were numerous incentives to go hungry and fast. For one, it was after all food that was behind the banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden, the tragedy of the Fall, and the consequent suffering their progeny would experience in their quarrels and disputes with each other over livelihood and sustenance. 'The trial of your father Adam', declared al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728), 'was over a morsel of food, and it will be your trial until the Day of Judgment'.[39] To rise above our most elemental, biological needs would be to return, in a sense, to the primordial state of Adam and Eve before they succumbed to the temptation of Iblīs and ate from the forbidden tree—it would be to rise above our bestiality to participate in the luminosity of the angels, and beyond that, God's own eternal mystery. It was perhaps this underlying sentiment that found a correlation between sin and satiety—sin being all that separated one from God, and satiety all that satisfied one in that separation. Thus Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 896), renowned for his extraordinary feats of fasting and hunger, could declare that 'the origin of every act of piety between the heavens and earth lies in

[38] Hujwīrī, *Kashf*, 320–32. He simply suggests this because the position is attributed to an anonymous figure.

[39] Sīrjānī, *Bayāḍ*, 149 [#316]. For more on Ḥasan, see Louis Massignon, *Essay on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism* (transl. Benjamin Clark; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 119–38. For a sceptical view of the records produced after his death, see Suleiman A. Mourad, *Early Islam Between Myth and History: al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110 H/728 CE) and the Formation of His Legacy in Classical Islamic Scholarship* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

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hunger, while the origin of every act of debauchery between the heavens and the earth lies in satiety'.[40] Or to quote Dhū al-Nūn (d. 859 or 861), 'I never ate to my full except that I disobeyed God—or was moved to it thereby'.[41] Likewise, Ibn Sālim declared, 'if you give the belly (*baṭn*) its share, then the rest of the limbs ask for their share',[42] an observation that calls to mind a story of Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī. One day as he strolled through a field of wheat, he observed a pair of birds frantically pecking at grain that had fallen to the ground. When they were satiated, the male was moved by desire for the female. 'Behold', Darānī informed his disciples, 'how their stomachs tempt them, when they have satisfied their hunger'.[43]

Hunger and fasting were also believed to be sources of higher knowledge. 'Never did I go hungry for the sake of God', declared Abū Bakr al-Shiblī (d. 946), 'even for a day, except that I gained through it a measure of wisdom and an admonition (*ʿibra*) previously unknown to me'.[44] And Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d. 848 or 875) said, 'Hunger is a cloud. When the heart is hungry it rains wisdom'.[45] On another occasion, when asked how he had obtained gnosis, he replied, 'through an empty stomach and

[40] Sīrjānī, *Bayāḍ*, 149 [#316]. The most comprehensive study of his life, thought and influence remains Gerhard Böwering's *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: The Qurʾānic Hermeneutics of the Ṣūfī Sahl at-Tustarī (d. 283/896)* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1980).

[41] Kharkūshī, *Tahdhīb*, 146; Ṭabarī, *Salwat*, 110 [#171]. For more on Dhū al-Nūn, see Michael Ebstein, 'Dū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī and early Islamic mysticism', *Arabica*, 61 (2014): 559–612; Mohammed Rustom, 'The Sufi teachings of Dhu'l Nun', *Sacred Web*, 24 (2009): 69–79; Josef van Ess, 'Der Kreis des Dhu'l-Nūn', *Die Welt des Orients*, 12 (1981): 99–105.

[42] Makkī, *Qūt*, ii. 334. As Harith bin Ramli notes, 'It is not always clear which Ibn Sālim is being referred to in much of the literature', whether father (909 CE) or son (967 CE). On Ibn Sālim and the Sālimiyya, see Harith bin Ramli, 'The Sālimiyya and Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī: the transmission of theological teachings in a Basran circle of mystics', *Les Maîtres Soufis et leurs disciples, IIIe–Ve siècles de l'hégire (IXe–XIe s.): enseignement, formation et transmission* (eds. Geneviève Gobillot and Jean-Jacquess Thibon; Beirut: IFPO, 2012): 101–29 (see n. 5).

[43] Cited in Andrae, *In the Garden of Myrtles*, 54.

[44] Literally, 'I saw in my heart a portion of wisdom (*al-ḥikma*) and an admonition (*ʿibra*)...' Kharkūshī, *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, 149; Ṭabarī, *Salwat*, 111 [#174]. For biographical details about his life, see Kenneth Avery, *Shiblī: His Life and Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014).

[45] Cited in Andrae, *In the Garden of Myrtles*, 54. For more on Bisṭāmī, see Jawid A. Mojaddedi, 'Getting drunk with Abū Yazīd or staying sober with Junayd: the creation of a popular typology of Sufism', *Bulletin of the SOAS*, 66/1 (2003): 1–13. See also his article, 'Bisṭāmī, Bāyazīd' in *EI*^{3}.

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a naked body'.[46] Along similar lines, Yaḥyā b. Muʿādh stated, 'hunger is a light (*nūr*) and satiety a fire (*nār*)',[47] because the latter consumes and destroys the soul, while the former brightens it with knowledge and understanding. From a psychological point of view, one may perhaps discern a relation between reducing one's food intake and cognitive lucidity. In the fast there is often a quieting of the mind that itself leads to a subtle transformation of consciousness, unknown to those inexperienced in the practice. In ordinary day-to-day circumstances, the hustle-and-bustle of sensory stimulation keeps the psyche preoccupied. But when the fast is aided by prayer, interiority, meditation, and silence, as it often is, a quiet peace enters, allowing for discernment and mental alertness.[48]

Perhaps the most important fruit of the fast was the intimacy it was thought to produce between God and the soul. A story is told of Christ in the early Islamic sources where he once asked God how one could obtain His proximity, to which He replied, 'O Son of Mary, there is no surer way for a servant to draw close to Me than through hunger and thirst'.[49] In the same way that satiety hardened the heart, hunger, or so it was argued, softened it. Among the signs of this softening was contrition for past wrongs and an abundance of tears. Qushayrī recounts a tale of a man who entered into the presence of a *shaykh* only to find him weeping. When he inquired about the reason behind his state, the *shaykh* replied, 'I am hungry'. 'A man of your stature weeps over hunger?' he asked in astonishment. 'Be silent! Do you not know that He desires from my hunger for me to weep?'[50] Indeed, the divine intimacy elicited through hunger and fasting led many of the early authorities to suggest that it was among the most potent ways to evoke a divine response. 'If you wish for anything in this world or the next', said Dārānī, 'go hungry first and then

[46] Makkī, *Qūt*, ii. 325–6.

[47] Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 284.

[48] This may be why in Christian tradition monastic rules have often required study and 'spiritual reading' in the hours before the opening of the fast, because when the mind clears it becomes receptive to intuitions welling up from deeper recesses of the self. Kathleen M. Dugan, 'Fasting for life: the place of fasting in the Christian tradition', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 63/3 (1995): 539–48, at 545. For a good overview of the spiritual practice in Christianity, see 'Fasting: Eastern Christian' and 'Fasting: Western Christian' in William M. Johnston (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Monasticism* (Chicago, IL: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2 vols., 2000), i. 468–72. See also second half of the dated but informative entry on fasting in James Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; New York: Scribner's, 13 vols., 1908–27), v. 759–71.

[49] Ṭabarī, *Salwat*, 111 [#173].

[50] Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 282.

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pray for whatever you desire'.[51] The miraculous feats of the saints were attributed to this same power. An early authority swore by God that no one had ever purified his soul except through hunger, that no one ever walked on water except through hunger, and no one traversed a great distance through a folding over of the earth (*ṭayy al-arḍ*)[52] except through hunger.[53] In the Gospel itself, we find a curious story of Christ driving out a demon from a man whom his disciples failed to exorcise. When asked why he had succeeded while they had failed, the Nazarene replied, 'this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting'.[54] The implication was that the fast allowed one to harness a spiritual power otherwise unrealizable. Indeed, the belief that depriving the body of food and drink could allow one to obtain what might seem out of reach can be found almost universally in the world's religions.[55] For the early mystics this power may well have rested in the virtual theomorphism brought about through the *ṣawm*: by emptying himself of the world, in the most literal sense, the faster might become, as it were, a portal for God's own creative activity, provided outward abstinence was accompanied by a corresponding internal fast, or an outward emptiness by an inward one.

We can also not ignore the incentives furnished by a desire simply to obtain in the afterlife, in more perfect and enduring form, what one might forego here in the world. Makkī shares the story of an aspirant (*murīd*) who deprived himself of the pleasure of bread, rice, and fish for twenty years as a means of taming the soul. Following his death, a sage beheld him in a dream, and inquired how he had been dealt with by God.

[51] Cited in Andrae, *In the Garden of Myrtles*, 54.

[52] The power to miraculously traverse distances almost instantaneously through *ṭayy al-ʿarḍ* (sometimes translated 'thaumaturgical teleportation') has frequently been ascribed to the Friends of God in Islam. A Qurʾānic allusion to this particular genus of miracles appears in the story of Solomon (27:38–40). Interestingly, Muslim spiritual authorities have often downplayed the value of such miraculous gifts. In one of Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh's aphorisms, he declares, 'the real *ṭayy* is when the stretch of this world is folded up before you, so you see that the next world is closer to you than your own soul', to which Ibn ʿAbbād of Ronda (d. 1390) adds by way of commentary, 'this is in truth the real 'folding over of the earth' [. . .] through which the Friends of God are graced by the Real, and through which their servitude is realized in its fullness before their Lord—not the *ṭayy al-arḍ* which may be the consequence of *istidrāj* and a subtle divine deception'. *Sharḥ al-ḥikam al-ʿAṭāʾiyya* (ed. Muḥammad Riḍā al-Qahwajī; Damascus: Dār al-Farfūr, 2003), 233 [#87].

[53] Makkī, *Qūt*, ii. 332.

[54] *Matthew* 17:21.

[55] See art. 'Fasting', *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, v. 759–60.

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'It could not have been better' he replied. 'The first gift I received from Him was bread, rice, and fish', adding that 'every desire of yours is gratified on this day without limit'. The response—an echo of Q. 69:24, *Eat and drink to your fill, for what you sent before you in your days past*—leads Makkī to write, 'every act has a reward in the next world that corresponds to its genus (*jins*) and inward meaning (*maʿnā*) [in this world]'.[56] The implication was that the delights reserved for the righteous in Paradise are not necessarily distributed generally but specifically, commensurate to all that one had left behind for God while on earth. Indeed, the value proto- and early Sufis placed on conquering our enslavement to the appetites of the body cannot be overstated. 'To leave one passion' declared Dārānī, 'is more beneficial for the heart than a year of voluntarily fasting and night prayer'.[57] While a concern with personal reward and punishment was recognized to mark lower stages of the spiritual life—as many of the aphorisms attributed to Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya (d. 801) testify[58]—it was nevertheless an important catalysing force for those not entirely driven by the love of God alone. Leaving behind the lawful, as we find in Makkī's story, out of a desire to overcome the powers of the flesh, as well as a scrupulous concern to avoid what is unlawful (with the former often aiding the latter), was widely regarded as one of the preliminary steps of the Way.

At least some of the early authorities were also attentive to the health benefits of moderate hunger and fasting. While not a prevailing theme in the literature—Hujwīrī states no more than '[h]unger sharpens the intelligence and improves the mind and health'[59]—others such as Makkī went to moderate lengths to address the benefits of a meagre diet. Commenting on the well-known ḥadīth that only a third of the stomach should be for food, with another third for water and the remainder empty, he recounts a tale from the life of Hārūn al-Rashīd (d. 809). Once four physicians from Greece, India, Iraq and black Africa were brought before the ʿAbbasid court and asked by the caliph for 'a medicine that has no medicine in it'. The Indian responded to the riddle by suggesting *ihlīlaj* (the emblic fruit of Phyllanthus), the Greek by proposing the seed of white garden peppergrass, and the Iraqi by recommending

[56] Makkī, *Qūt*, ii. 336.

[57] Ibid.

[58] On the distinction between the Rābiʿa of myth and history, see Rkia Elaroui Cornell, *Rabiʿa from Narrative to Myth: The Many Faces of Islam's Most Famous Woman Saint, Rabiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya* (London: Oneworld Academic, 2019).

[59] Hujwīrī, *Kashf*, 324. And in Kharkūshī we find a saying attributed to Dhū al-Nūn, 'the health of the body lies in paucity of food, while the health of the spirit lies in paucity of sins'. Kharkūshī, *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, 147.

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hot water. When it came to the turn of the African doctor, he pointed out the medicinal ingredients present in the recommendations of the others and then proceeded to offer his own solution: one should simply lift up his hand from the meal after a few morsels while there still remains a desire for more.[60] The simple act of abstention, against the countervailing inclination to continue, would in itself be healing.

While the strictly biological benefits of hunger and fasting remain unsettled in modern allopathic medicine, they are widely recognized in alternative forms of the science (naturopathic, homeopathic, Indian, Chinese) attested to by the growing popularity of health fasting. Advocates ascribe to it a wide range of beneficial effects, from detoxifying the body and repairing the gastrointestinal tract to neurogenesis. Some studies have even found that caloric reduction may increase one's lifespan. Ketosis in particular, the body's use of stored fat as the primary source of energy instead of carbohydrates, is often viewed as the primary healer.[61] While, as noted, some of our authors did pay attention to the positive biological consequences of fasting and moderate hunger, they were careful to ensure that the aspirant not become overly preoccupied simply with bodily health, since 'actions', after all, 'are by intentions'. We know that Ibn al-ʿArabī, writing a few centuries later but heavily indebted to the early tradition, felt that if one's fast was motivated solely by a desire to maintain the wholesomeness of the body's constitution, the act was not *ṣawm* but rather *ḥamiyya*, that is to say 'zeal' (a term used in the Qurʾān to describe the attitudes of pre-Islamic Arabs), because the *ṣawm* proper has as its ultimate end the pleasure of God, and beyond that, effacement in divine *ṣamadiyya*. If, however, the goal through bodily health was to enable one to more vigorously devote oneself to the worship and service of God, then the underlying intention was pure and the act deserved its conventional name.[62]

ON THE DANGERS OF HUNGER AND FASTING

Considering the value that was placed on hunger and the fast for adepts in the formative period, we should note that the early masters were aware of certain dangers that may lie in wait for those who reduced their

[60] Makkī, *Qūt*, ii. 329.

[61] For a synopsis of the debate surrounding the benefits of fasting, and the arguments presented by proponents of health fasting, see Sharman Apt Russell, *Hunger: An Unnatural History* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 37–71.

[62] William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn ʿArabī's Cosmology* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1998), 314–15.

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consumption of food. Among them was the potential ostentation (*riyāʾ*) of revealing to others the paucity of one's own diet. This was particularly the case for those who did not eat as meagrely in private as they did in public, since the inconsistency betrayed the *ṣidq al-ḥāl* or 'sincerity of state' demanded by the spiritual life. When one of the learned ones (*baʿḍ al-ʿulamāʾ*) was asked whether he was aware of any fault in a certain *zāhid* or renunciant, he replied, 'I know of none except one. He eats in seclusion what he does not when with others'.[63] This is why the authorities would often insist that one partake of food offered in public, not only because of the courtesy (*adab*) demanded by the offering of lawful food by a well-meaning host, but because the delight in being recognized for one's detachment might well outweigh the delight of the meal. And this is why Makkī states that the 'sincere ones' would sometimes eat more lavishly in public than in private, as a way to safeguard the soul from pride.[64] The same concern to conceal the loftiness of one's own state led a *shaykh* to respond to a novice who openly confessed, 'I am hungry', with a harsh admonishment: 'You lie! For hunger is a secret from among the secrets of God, stored in His repositories. He does not grant it to one who divulges it'.[65] The implication was that *jūʿ* alone was not enough, and that it had to be constrained by certain rules—hence the cautionary words of Sahl al-Tustarī, 'Satan does not approach the one who hungers, if God wills, so long as his hunger is conditioned by knowledge'.[66]

In his *Book of Flashes* Sarrāj would also address the dangers of *ṣawm* and *jūʿ* in a short section devoted to those who went astray on the Path:[67]

> A group of novices and beginners heard of the science of opposing the lower self. They imagined that if it is broken by abandoning food, one will become secure from its evil and the consequences of its machinations. Thus, they abandoned their customary habits of eating and drinking but without observing the rules of propriety in abandoning food, and without seeking the advice of proper teachers about these rules. Instead, they relied simply on abandoning

[63] Makkī, *Qūt*, ii. 340.

[64] Ibid, 340–1.

[65] Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*, 185. See also Kharkūshī, *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, 147; Sīrjā nī, *Bayāḍ*, 148 [# 315]. While this may also be a reference to spiritual hunger—a longing or desire for God—the account appears within sections of these texts devoted to physical hunger and fasting.

[66] Sīrjānī, *Bayāḍ*, 148 [#315].

[67] For a discussion of this final section of the book, as well as Sulamī's reliance on it for the composition of one of his own works, see Jawad Anwar Qureshi, 'Books of errors: a critical edition and study of the *Kitāb al-Aghālīt* by Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021)' (MA Diss., University of Georgia, 2002).

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> food. In this way, they continued for days and nights through the continuous fast and presumed they had reached a special state (*ḥāl*). In truth, they went astray. And this is because the spiritual aspirant (*murīd*) requires a teacher to direct him to what he needs, and to see to it that there is not born from his desire a tribulation or a trial, the adverse effects of which he cannot overcome on his own. One cannot be free of the deceptive machinations of the lower self ... (for) it calls to evil (*al-ammāra bi-l-sūʾ*) ... He who presumes that if the lower self is broken simply through hunger and paucity of food, that he will become free of its machinations ... has gone astray.[68]

In other words, hunger and fasting cannot on their own tame the lower soul and protect one from its wiles, particularly when the exercise is undertaken without the wise counsel of an experienced master who might find there to be a greater benefit for the aspirant to eat for nourishment or forgo voluntary fasting. It is known that despite his own virtually superhuman capacity to go without food for extraordinary lengths, Sahl would instruct his disciples to consume meat on Fridays because of the strength it would give them for their devotions.[69] And Sarrāj himself expresses his own consternation at having witnessed a faction of aspirants that went so far in denying themselves food and drink that they lost the ability to carry out their canonical prayers (*fātathum al-farīḍa*).[70]

Hujwīrī would later clarify that the superhuman feats of the friends of God were themselves *karāmāt* or miracles, and could not be feigned through mechanical imitation. Of Sahl's abilities in particular, he observed that it 'exceeds the limit of human endurance, and cannot be accomplished by anyone without divine aid, which itself becomes a nourishment'.[71] Interestingly, he also ascribed such powers to Sarrāj, who once reportedly observed an entire Ramaḍān in Baghdad while overseeing a group of dervishes without eating even the loaves of bread that the servant left for him in the private chamber he was given at the Shūnīziyya Mosque, opening the fast (we must presume) only with water, and without losing any of the rigour necessary for his extensive vigils and Qurʾān recitations.[72] Sarrāj's criticisms are not directed at advanced mystics who may go without nourishment for inordinate periods without it impinging on their ability to perform religious devotions. Instead, it is aimed at

[68] Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-lumaʿ*, 369.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Hujwīrī, *Kashf*, 322.

[72] Ibid, 323. Sahl would open his fast in Ramaḍān with water out of respect for the *sunna*, and while Hujwīrī remains silent on the issue, we have no reason to suspect that Sarrāj would have done otherwise.

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those who imitate their herculean attainments without first having observed the requisite etiquettes of wayfaring or *sulūk*, and whose spiritual immaturity is borne witness to by the adverse effects their zealous renunciation has on their capacity to go about their daily affairs.

ON TRANSCENDING HUNGER AND FASTING

Before we bring our treatment to a close, we should qualify some of our comments above, which, if left as they are, would lead us not only to a partial but misleading view of early approaches to the subject, and to the broader methods offered for realizing the final stages of the Way. For our authorities, even when hunger and fasting are pursued properly, within constraints, there is still no guarantee that they will not become impediments to the mystical life. The danger stems from a failure to recognize their relative value. That is, one can become so habituated to *ṣawm* and *jūʿ* that one remains unaware of their function as no more than means to an end. To be more precise, the danger lies in becoming so attached to fasting that eating and drinking become more difficult for the soul than abstention. The logic of *mukhālafat al-nafs* or 'opposing the self', so central to early Muslim otherworldly piety, would in this light sometimes require consuming food and drink when the soul became averse to it, just as it required depriving it of food and drink when it became overly attached to it, so as to enable the seeker to rise above the power of desire and habituation altogether. And this is why Sahl would say, 'when you are satiated, seek hunger from the One who tried you with satiety. And when you hunger, seek satiety from the One who tried you with hunger'.[73] In other words, do not be attached to either state, for the attachment itself may well prevent you from freeing yourself from the fetters of the self. And it was for this same reason that Ibn Sālim disapproved of the practice of a certain *shaykh* of Basra who fasted throughout the year (= *ṣawm al-dahr*)[74] with a diet of bread once a week, on Friday. 'I will not greet him', he upbraided the man, 'until he breaks his fast with

[73] Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*, 153; cf. Kharkūshī, *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, 146.

[74] For most authorities, this would exclude the prohibited days of ʿĪd and *Tashrīk*. Ghazālī (d. 1111) notes that *ṣawm al-dahr* was a practice of a faction of the Prophet's Companions and early Muslims (*jamāʿa min al-ṣaḥāba wa-l-tābiʿīn*), and that within certain circumstances and conditions, it is acceptable. With that said, Ghazālī generally discourages it: *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (Aleppo: Dār al-Waʿy, 5 vols., 1998), i. 408–9. Cf. M. A. Fitzgerald's translation of this chapter in *The Mysteries of Charity and the Mysteries of Fasting: Books 5 and 6 of the Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2018).

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bread', because he had grown overly attached to fasting and his ascetic regimen.[75]

An illustration of the drawbacks inherent in such an imbalanced approach can also be found in the account of another *shaykh* who would fast continuously, regardless of whether he was travelling or not. Once his companions pressured him to take a break from his routine of self-denial. Upon acquiescing, he became so sick from abandoning his usual custom that he could no longer perform his most rudimentary religious rites.[76] The lesson, as far as Sarrāj is concerned, is that when the soul becomes overly accustomed to a pious activity, the joy it derives through the cementing of practice may warp into its underlying motive, displacing what should be a desire for divine satisfaction alone—an intention the sincerity of which can be gauged by the hardship imposed by it. And this is why the early authorities were virtually unanimous in their view that the reason the Prophet considered the alternating fast of David to be the best of fasts was because it prevented the soul from experiencing the pleasure borne of habit.[77] Dārānī seems to have expressed a similar concern over the fruits of his own labour when he confessed, near the end of his life, 'for forty years I have not felt the pain of hunger, and I fear I may be deprived of its reward on such account'.[78]

Some of the reports of how lavishly the early masters might indulge themselves, in the right circumstances, overturn simplistic notions about hunger and fasting that arise from a cursory or superficial reading of the texts. Makkī relates an episode from the life of Ibrāhīm b. Adham (d. 778-9) where the prince famous for abandoning a kingdom to devote himself to a life of renunciation, prayer and lawful earning once gave a companion some money, and instructed him to 'fetch for us some Ḥawrānī butter, honey, and bread'. He replied in surprise, 'O Abū Isḥāq, with all of this money?' 'Woe unto you!' retorted Ibrāhīm, 'when we find, we eat like men, and when deprived, we bear patiently like men'.[79] The fraternal gathering of those bound by a love for God justified the seeming extravagance. And this is why Makkī in another context writes that 'in eating with one's brethren, there are [...many...] virtues. It has been related by Jaʿfar b. Muḥammad—may God be pleased with both of them— 'when you sit with your brethren before the table spread, prolong your sitting, for it is a time during which no account will be taken of

[75] Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*, 155.
[76] Ibid, 153.
[77] Bukhārī, no. 3420. Sarrāj cites a slight variant, *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*, 153.
[78] Sīrjānī, *Bayāḍ*, 150 [#319]
[79] Makkī, *Qūt*, ii. 343.

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you'.'[80] We also find an account of Bishr al-Ḥāfī (d. 841) where a friend came to visit him while he was fasting. 'He placed a handful of money in my hand', recounts Ḥusayn al-Maghāzilī, 'and said, "purchase for us the choicest food, sweets and perfume you find in the market".' 'He had never spoken like this to me', Maghāzilī recalls. 'I did as he instructed and placed the food before them. He began to eat with his guest, even though I had never seen him eat with anyone before.'[81] Such occasions would also foster gratitude for divine blessings, thereby ensuring that early mystical teachings remained in close conformity to the underlying ethos of the Qurʾān, and the ascetic tendencies of the renunciants kept in check. 'The eating of wholesome food (*ṭayyibāt*)', as Dārānī would say, 'produces good-pleasure (*riḍā*) with God'.[82]

Breaking a voluntary fast when the circumstances demanded it—not an infrequent theme in the literature—underscored the necessity of liberating oneself from an attachment to fasting, and more generally, of cultivating what has sometimes been described as *zuhd al-zuhd*, 'renunciation from renunciation' or perhaps more accurately, 'detachment from detachment'. Once Abū Isḥāq al-Fazārī (d. 804) placed a bowl of *khabīṣ*[83] before Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 778) who had come to visit him. 'Were it not that I were fasting', the guest replied, 'I would join you'. 'Your brother Ibrāhīm b. Adham visited me earlier' said Fāzārī, 'and sat where you now sit. I placed before him *khabīṣ* in this bowl which he ate. When he was about to leave, he said 'although fasting I was moved by love to join you, so as to gladden your heart'.' 'Sufyan lowered his hand and began to eat', Fazārī relates, 'having learned a lesson in propriety from Ibrāhīm.'[84] And it was said about Junayd that although he would fast regularly, when guests came over he would join them in the meal so as not to create inconvenience, declaring that such a virtue was no less than the *ṣawm*, so long as it was voluntary.[85] But such acts extended beyond simply an occasion that might call for the breaking of a fast: if pleasant food were ever placed before Maʿrūf al-Karkhī (d. 815), he would help himself to the offering. Once, on being informed that Bishr al-Ḥāfī would hold himself back by exercising restraint, he replied, 'your

[80] Ibid, 353.

[81] Ibid, 343. For biographical entries on Bishr, see Hujwīrī, *Kashf*, 105–6; Iṣfahānī, *Ḥilyat*, viii. 378–403; Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 65–9. For a study of his representation of him in the source literature, see Michael Cooperson, 'Ibn Ḥanbal and Bishr al-Ḥāfī: a case study in biographical traditions', *Studia Islamica*, 86/2 (1997): 71–101.

[82] Makkī, *Qūt*, ii. 344.

[83] A dish made of dates, raisins and butter.

[84] Makkī, *Qūt*, ii. 343.

[85] Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*, 153.

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brother Bishr has been seized by scrupulous piety (*waraʿ*), whereas I have been expanded by gnosis (*maʿrifa*)', adding, 'I am a guest in the abode of my Master. If He feeds me, I eat, and if He makes me hunger, I am patient. What have I to do with objection and preference?'[86] The implication here was that the gnostics or *ʿārifūn* have moved beyond an attachment to hunger, food, and drink, and simply respond to the circumstances where God places them. They have relinquished self-will and desire, and give each moment its due.

Indeed, near the end of his lengthy treatment of fasting and hunger, Makkī states that whereas the novices must strive to subjugate the appetites of the body through *jūʿ* and *ṣawm*, the gnostics are no longer tried by the culinary delights of the world, so that when they are given food by God, they eat in moderation and gratitude, and when hungered, they endure in patience. The practice, he reminds his readers, is itself rooted in the *sunna*, since the Prophet would discern what course to take for the day regarding the fast outside of Ramaḍān through his intimate relation with Heaven because 'there lay between him and God a sign (*ʿalāma*)', and it was often simply whether food had been prepared for him by his family. The same may be said of the gnostics, who through insight (*baṣīra*) and divine witnessing (*mushāhada*) determine what is demanded of them on each occasion, with the decision made in a state where they have no particular preference, neither towards fasting nor going hungry—an attitude that calls to mind the advice of Meister Eckhart, 'they can justifiably feast who would just as willingly fast'.[87] But the author of the *Nourishment* is also aware of the subtle trickery that might be at play in the mind of a novice who uses occasions of apparent divine direction as an excuse to escape the rigour of the *ṣawm*. And so he insists that if one does break the fast due to an offering of food, he must see to it that he remain no less vigilant in guarding his sight, hearing, speech, heart, hands and feet from sin outside of the fast just as he would within it, and that his intention in drawing close to God through breaking it be no less intense than were he to take it to its proper end. While Makkī does not go to great lengths to discuss the importance of moving beyond *jū*' and *ṣawm*, since his work is primarily a text of practical conduct or *muʿāmala* aimed at seekers and aspirants, he gives the reader enough to recognize that the penultimate stages of the path require breaking any idol of hunger and fasting that may be erected through prolonged renunciation. A testimony he shares from Sahl is illustrative: when the saint who developed a reputation perhaps more than any other figure in

[86] Makkī, *Qūt*, ii. 343.
[87] *Meister Eckhart: Selected Writings* (transl. Oliver Davies; London: Penguin, 1994), 31.

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the formative history of Islam for the austerity of his diet was asked in his later years to describe his daily routine, he replied, 'now I eat without a concern for limits or a reckoning of time'.[88] The implication was not that he went to the opposite extreme of satiety or *shabʿ*, but that the taxing rigours he had imposed on himself in his youth had been relaxed, and were no longer necessary, since he had obtained from hunger and fasting what they had to offer, namely a taming of the lower soul and effacement in divine *ṣamadiyya*. Sahl would likely have little reason to disagree with the words of Abū Saʿīd al-Kharrāz (d. 899) when he declared, 'hunger is the food of the renunciants, while remembrance is the food of the gnostics'.[89]

Yet there still remains the question of the metaphysical significance of moving beyond fasting and hunger. If *ṣawm* and *jūʿ* allow one to participate in God's transcendence, otherness, and independence, as we have seen, what might opening the fast, eating a pleasant meal, and enjoying His bounties allow one to experience with respect to the divine nature, if anything at all? The early texts appear to be silent on the question, with the suggestion that it is only hunger that provides a portal into the unfathomable mystery of the Godhead. However, if we take the line of reasoning offered for the deeper meaning of *ṣawm* and *jūʿ* to its end, it is not entirely unreasonable to suggest that eating and drinking may allow one to taste 'eucharistically' (perhaps both figuratively and literally) God's presence in the world, His nearness and immanence—in other words, the presence of that which transcends matter and form within this very world, or expressed differently, the One in the many. After all, we read in the Qurʾān such verses as *Whithersoever you turn, there is the face of God* (Q 2:115), and *Look at the traces of the mercy of God* (Q 30:50), passages often taken to highlight the divine self-disclosures or *tajalliyāt* encountered through vision. Would it be a stretch to suggest that these self-disclosures may also be accessible through taste? The proposition, it seems, is not entirely incongruous with Sufi metaphysical thought as it would develop in subsequent tradition, as it sought to draw out what was implicit in the meditations of proto- and early Sufis, and no less importantly, in *tawḥīd* itself. But it should be clear that the encounter

[88] Makkī, *Qūt*, ii. 343.

[89] Sīrjānī, *Bayāḍ*, 150 [#320]. For a list of Kharrāz's works, see Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums* (Leiden: Brill, 9 vols., 1967–), i. 646. Some of the short extant treatises were edited by Qāsim al-Sāmarrāʾī and published as *Rasāʾil al-Kharrāz* (Baghdad: Maṭbaʿat al-Majmaʿ al-ʿIlmī, 1967), later translated by Nada A. Saab in her dissertation, which also offers a good introduction to his life and thought. 'Sufi theory and language in the writings of Abū Saʿīd al-Kharrāz (d. 286/899)' (PhD diss., Yale, 2004), 142–82.

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with God through food and drink would not be possible without an experience of the divine nature *outside* of food and drink, in hunger and fasting, so that in order to encounter the One in the many, one must first have encountered the One alone. Hence the importance of the *ṭarīqa* before the *ḥaqīqa*, or the Way that must precede the full realization of Truth. And thus, in the same way that the saint must first experience God in His solitude before he may do so in the world of the senses—in emulation of the order of the Prophet's nocturnal ascent—he must first taste divine transcendence in hunger before tasting His immanence in food and drink. Were such an encounter with God not possible at all through the domain of the senses, it seems unlikely that the early mystics would have spoken about the need to move beyond an attachment to hunger and fasting, since it would imply abandoning God. Once again, these are no more than speculative considerations, but considerations that appear to have at least some basis within the logic of early contemplative modes of thinking.

To close, it should be reiterated that recognizing the limitations of *ṣawm* and *jūʿ* does not imply regularly eating to one's fill, let alone the sin of gluttony. There is no evidence for such a view, neither in the early literature nor for that matter in the *sunna*, which the early authorities always took very seriously. When Abū Bakr (d. 634) once learned that his son had eaten so much he had fallen nauseous, he vowed, 'were he to die, I swear I would not attend his funeral'.[90] Whether or not he was merely being rhetorical, his umbrage expressed a sentiment well known to early Islam and attested to by numerous ḥadīths. Hunger and fasting were therefore at least partly meant, as already noted, to overcome the power of desire, so that one might eat and enjoy without desire, or at least without an enslavement to it. And this is why when Bishr was once offered a dish containing eggplant by one of his close friends, he politely refused. 'Were I to eat with anyone', he said, 'I would eat with you', but 'I have craved eggplant for years, and it was not destined for me to have it'. When the host insisted, assuring him it was lawfully procured, he replied, 'not until I am liberated of my desire for it'.[91] As for those who have moved beyond the level of *zuhd* into *maʿrifa*, the same restrictions, as we have seen, are no longer necessary, since they now occupy the station of what—to move beyond our narrow focus on the early period—Ibn al-ʿArabī would identify as *tark al-jūʿ* or 'abandoning

[90] Makkī, *Qūt*, ii. 321.
[91] Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 285–6.

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hunger', a theme he would explore in a very short chapter devoted to the subject in the *Meccan Revelations*.[92]

CONCLUSION

We began this by drawing attention to Plato's famous distinction in the *Phaedo* between the body and the soul. From our treatment so far, it should be clear that in the early tradition the *nafs* could occupy any one of a number of rungs of a ladder, depending on its degree of catharsis or *tazkiya*, with its standing at the lowest levels implying both an attachment and subordination to carnal appetite, and at higher, more elevated ones a domination and control of the outermost layer of human selfhood. Muḥāsibī (d. 857) was perhaps the first to delineate the degrees of this ladder or vertical spectrum systematically through a meditation on those scriptural passages that alluded to the various types of *nufūs*—from 'the soul that calls to evil' (*al-nafs al-ammāra bi-l sūʾ*) and the 'self-reproaching soul' (*al-nafs al-lawwāma*) to the 'soul at peace' (*al-nafs al-muṭmaʾinna*)—and their relation to the posthumous or afterlife states.[93] This stratification would itself be refined and elaborated quite extensively in later tradition through developing the fundamental insights, sometimes only in embryonic form, already present in the works of Islam's earliest moral psychologist.[94] Some would argue that the *nafs*, in so far as it represented individual human identity, itself stood between the *rūḥ* or transpersonal Spirit and the *jasad, jism* or body, with its degree of purity corresponding to the extent of its nearness to the former.

As for the relation of the various kinds of souls to food and drink, the early mystical authorities of Islam understood there to be a progressive, qualitative difference as one moved up this hierarchy of possibilities. At the very bottom, there stood the man entirely driven by *shahwa* and

[92] Atif Khalil, 'White death: Ibn al-ʿArabī on the trials and virtues of hunger and fasting', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 141/3 (2021): 577–86. See also, Qaiser Shahzad, 'Transcending the forms from within: the mystical interpretation of fasting in Sufism, with special reference to Ibn ʿArabi', *Maʿarif-e Islami*, 12/2 (2013): 10–22. I am grateful to the author for bringing this work to my attention, unknown to me when I wrote my own article.

[93] The typology is rooted in the Qurʾān. See Gavin Picken, *Spiritual Purification in Islam: The Life and Works of al-Muḥāsibī* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 134–9.

[94] On Muḥāsibī's influence on later Islamic tradition, see Margaret Smith's still useful treatment in *An Early Mystic of Baghdad: A Study of the Life and Teaching of Ḥārith B. Asad al-Muḥāsibī A.D. 781–857* (1935; repr., London: Sheldon Press, 1977), 269–91. See also Picken, *Spiritual Purification*.

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carnality, who exercised no discernment in what he consumed, with perhaps only an elementary concern for health and physical well-being (if even that). Next, there was the believer from among the ranks of the *ʿawāmm* or 'common folk', attentive to the lawful and the prohibited, but not necessarily to the subtle effects of overconsumption, nor to food of ethically and religiously questionable status. Above him was the wayfarer who eliminated food of doubtful status and reduced his intake of what was itself perfectly permissible through a disciplined regimen to tame and control the appetites of the flesh, with the aim of realizing *zuhd* and *waraʿ* in all its modes. Finally, at the summit of this ascent there towered the gnostic who had procured all that was possible in this world through renunciation, and who had now relaxed the strictures of controlled self-discipline. In his outward diet, the gnostic stood somewhere in between the *ʿawāmm* and the *zuhhād*, even though inwardly he outranked them both. The upward movement through this vertical hierarchy of soul-types was itself understood to be catalysed or set in motion, as we have seen, by a contraction in one's consumption of food and drink through self-denial, fasting, and hunger—the last of which was famously described by Yaḥyā b. Muʿādh as 'God's food on earth'.[95] While this picture may, in some respects, oversimplify matters, it nevertheless provides a relatively accurate though rudimentary illustration of the defining characteristics of the various degrees of human spiritual attainment and their concomitant attitudes towards *ṣawm* and *jūʿ*, and in a way that helps us decipher and make sense not only of the many stories and sayings that make up the early source material, but also, and equally importantly, their apparent contradictions.

[95] The saying ends, 'and through it the bodies of the veracious are made pure'. Sīrjānī, *Bayāḍ*, 150 [#319]. Cf. Kharkūshī, *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, 145. Compare with Hujwīrī, who states that the 'least degree of fasting is hunger, which is God's food on earth': *Kashf*, 321.

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