



“ FASTING IN ISLAM ”

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"O you who believe; Fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may guard against evil." (Holy Quran, 2:183).

Those who "believe", really believe in the unseen and they act in that belief, whatever the consequences. Now that is not an irrational or unscientific attitude. All scientific development has taken place on that basis. Newton saw the apple fall down from the tree (and not go up as it should have because of the earth's spin). Observing that phenomenon, he believed that there was an unseen force working on that apple which pulled it down. On that belief or faith, he worked and discovered all the wonderful scientific laws and phenomena that laid the foundation of modern science. To come to recent times, who ever saw the atom or will ever see it? And yet believing that the unseen atom exists, because of certain evidence on the subject, the wonders of the atomic science have been revealed.

Lesson from Life:

Take man's own daily life. He eats and drinks because he believes that they will do him good or satisfy his hunger and thirst. But, little does he know that in that food or drink may lurk germs which may make him very ill or kill him. Similarly, man travels in the belief that he will reach his destination safely. If he could foresee, an accident to his body or limb, or his body being crushed to death in a collision, he would not travel on that bus, train or aeroplane. Parents marry off their beloved daughter in the belief that she will be happy. If they could see beforehand her life-long misery or suffering that might follow, they would not commit her to it. A businessperson makes a deal in the belief that it will benefit him. He does not, in fact he cannot, see beforehand what will be the result.

A doctor prescribes a medicine or an operation. Believing in him, we take that medicine or accept the operation. And yet, either may kill us. We are prepared to believe in a doctor who can be ill-informed, or may make an honest or careless mistake, and be killed. But we will not believe in Allah, Who can never make a mistake because He is All-Knowing, and undertake fasting. We must have reasons or proof.

Practical Proof:

Well, let us have the proof. The verse I have quoted says that fasting was prescribed for those before us too - not fasting for a few days only, or partial self-denial of certain foods only, as exists in other communities today. The Holy Quran says that this variation is due to the loss or corruption of Divine teachings in other religions. Fasting was prescribed for them too as in Islam.

Let us take the first claim of the Holy Quran that fasting was prescribed in all religions. This is borne out by history. To cite only one authority, the Encyclopaedia Britannica says:

"It would be difficult to name any religious system in which it (fasting) is wholly unrecognized."

The variation of motives for fasting makes no difference to the rigours of fasting. But the duration and nature of the self-denial do. Let us take the three great religions other than Islam viz., Christianity, Buddhism and Judaism. It is clear from the Bible that Moses as well as Jesus fasted fully for 40 days! As for Mahatma Buddha, he fasted until he was reduced almost to skin and bones as we see in his statues.

Now the testimony of millions of Prophets, saints and virtuous people is that fasting is good, in fact a must, for self purification. Could there be a better proof? These were truthful men who spoke from personal experience. And the world at large saw the transformation in them.

Scientific Reason:

But the Holy Quran does not rest its case on such overwhelming evidence only. It goes on to say: "So that you may guard against evil." Now this is the special beauty of the Holy Quran, not to be found in other revealed books. It gives reasons for any injunction given. It gives the objective for which any obligation is laid on man, so that he may act by conviction, and know the goal which he has to seek. A Muslim does not fumble in the dark. He knows what he has to seek; and he can judge his performance by the end result.

The result he seeks in fasting is that he may be enabled to guard against evil. Now why should that be such a difficult task that he should have to undergo the rigours of fasting for one whole month? To guard against evil successfully is in fact a very, very difficult achievement. Even in this age of reason, education and enlightenment, we see evil all around us. Even the so-called civilised nations of present day are seething with crime, sin and even unnatural offences. Education, moral codes and legal enactments are of no avail. The public opinion, far from inhibiting crime and vices, adjusts itself to them. Why is all this so when man's reason, his good sense, and even his religion tell him that crime and sin are bad?

Animal Urges:

The answer is that man is driven by the animal within him. Man shares with the animals his physical body. That is why scientists try out medicines on animals first, before giving them to man. Since the animals and man have the same basic physique, the desires and passions, which arise from the physical body, are basically the same between man and animals. The animal urges within man are necessary to drive him to all actions, but like all animals they have to be trained and tamed.

Taming the Animal:

Now how do you tame an animal? Ask any circus manager. He will tell you that animals are tamed by denying them food and drink. Sex in the case of animals is seasonal. In the case of man, it is perennial. That is why Islam has required that man should deny himself

food, drink and sex during fasting. Study the life of all animals. Their only aim in life is to indulge in food, drink and sex. Man is superior to all creation. In him lodges the divine spark of the soul, which can make him acquire divine virtues. Hence said the Holy Prophet (pbuh): "Learn the morals of Allah." And the Holy Quran says: "Allah's colouring, and who is better in colouring than Allah?"(2:138). Allah's colouring are His sublime attributes.

The animal urges within man, if brought under control and given the right direction, can lead to his moral and spiritual development. This is a big subject in itself, but it has been beautifully explained in "The Teachings of Islam" by the late Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Sahib, to which I would refer the reader.

Other Teachings/Religions:

Other religions, after the loss or corruption of their original teachings, found the animal urges so difficult to tame and guide that they prescribed total denial. You had to become a monk or a nun or a Sadhu or a Bhikshu (in Buddhism) and kill animal desires by total and life-long denial. But those teachings failed, as those who have an inkling of the private lives of such givers-up of the worldly desires know. In any case, the sublime moral and spiritual qualities which man can attain by the correct use of his desires and passions were not to be found in them.

The Religion of Nature:

Islam, which is the religion of nature, recognises the great use to which the animal urges of man can be put if they are properly tamed and guided. Allah, being the Perfect Creator, has not created them in vain. But they have to be tamed. And like all animals, they can be tamed only through fasting, i.e., self denial of food, drink and sex for one month only, and that too during the day time. That is as far as the taming of the animal within man is concerned. As for guidance after taming, the Holy Quran also provides it. Read the opening verses of the Holy Quran: "I, Allah, am the Best Knower. This Book, there is no doubt in it, is a guide to those who guard against evil." (2:1 to 2).

The Holy Quran accordingly tells us not only what the evil features or development of human action or human nature can be, but it also teaches us how to avoid them. In the latter class is fasting which enables man to tame the animal urges within him and thus avoid exceeding the Divine limits, beyond which lies evil. It is because man cannot benefit fully from the Divine guidance provided in the Holy Quran, unless he first tames the animal urges within himself by fasting that has been prescribed or made obligatory for him. Hence, the month in which the Holy Quran was revealed was selected for this exercise in self-discipline. "The month of Ramadan is that in which the Quran was revealed, a guidance to men and clear reason for the guidance and a Distinguisher (between good and bad)." (2:185).

The Goal:

Now every guidance is towards a goal. What is that goal of the guidance contained in the Holy Quran? Hence the next verse says: "and when My servants ask thee concerning Me, surely I am nigh"(2:186). The verse goes on to say that Allah should be sought particularly in the Tahajjud prayer in the early hours of the morning, which is facilitated by the believer having to get up for his pre-dawn meal during the fasting.

This, in a nutshell, is the great wisdom and vital importance of the institution of fasting in Islam.