

Fast 5: Fasting — further information

- The commandments of the Holy Quran are meant for those who are full-grown, and so is the injunction relating to fasts. Minors should not fast, but the Caliph Umar is quoted as saying: “Even our children are fasting” (Bukhari, heading above h. 1960). The object may have been to habituate children to fasting. Otherwise, only such people are under obligation to fast who are physically fit and capable of understanding the purpose of fasting.
- ‘**Intention’ (*niyyah*) of fasting:** *Niyyah* really means *intention, aim or purpose* in the doing of a thing; but it is wrongly supposed that the *niyyah* of fasting consists of repeating certain words stating that one intends to fast. In Bukhari, there is a chapter in his book on Fasting headed:

“He who fasts during Ramadan having faith (in Allah) and seeking His pleasure and **having an intention (*niyyah*)**.”

The words of the Holy Prophet are then given, saying:

“People will be raised up (on the Day of Judgment) according to their intentions (*niyyah*).” (Bukhari, heading above hadith 1901)

What this means is that the person who fasts must have an aim or purpose before him. The aim or purpose of fasting is, according to the Quran, to make the fast a spiritual discipline, meaning to attain nearness to God and to seek His pleasure in all one’s actions, and to make it a moral discipline, meaning to shun all evil. **It is in this sense alone** that the *niyyah* is of the essence of fasting, as ‘intention’ is in fact of the essence of all good actions. If a good action is done with a bad aim, it shall not benefit the doer.

- On Ramadan timetables, and elsewhere, words of *niyyah*, or intention to fast, are often quoted, and these are supposed to be uttered when starting the fast. This expression of the intention by a set formula of words is unknown to the Holy Quran and the Hadith. Only in the case of voluntary fasting outside Ramadan, instances are reported in Hadith of making up the mind in daytime to fast, when nothing had been eaten up to that time, which is understandable. But there is no question of expressing such intention in the month of Ramadan, when people know that they must fast.
- **What breaks the fast?** The three things which a person should abstain from in fasting are eating, drinking and having sexual intercourse. If any of these three acts is done out of free will and intentionally during the fast, this would break the fast. But if done by mistake (e.g., by forgetfulness or under the wrong impression that the fast has

ended), the fast remains and must be completed. If a fast is broken on a cloudy day, under the impression that the sun has set, and the sun then appears, then also the fast should be completed till sunset. It is not invalidated.

- Rinsing the mouth with water or with a toothbrush, gargling or sniffing the water into the nostrils, even if a little water passes into the throat unintentionally, does not break the fast. Nor does taking a bath or keeping a wet cloth on the head or pouring water on the head break the fast, **even though done intentionally** to relieve the severity of thirst. If food is being cooked during fasting and it needs to be tasted on the tongue, this is allowed, as the food is not consumed thereby. Vomiting also does not break the fast, for a fast is broken by that which goes into the body, not by that which comes out.
- The Holy Quran does not mention the application of any punishment for deliberately breaking the fast. Hadith only shows that it is sufficient that the violator should be sincerely repentant. ([See the hadith](#) which we have quoted at the end of this Study.)
- There is a well-known hadith in Bukhari as follows:

“Fasting is a shield, so let the one who fasts not indulge in any foul speech or do any evil deed, and if anyone fights or quarrels with him or abuses him, he should say, I am fasting. By Him Who holds my soul in His hand, the breath of the faster is more pleasant with Allah than the scent of musk.” (hadith 1904, see also hadith 1894)

It is not refraining from food that makes the breath of the faster so sweet; it is refraining from foul speech and abuse and evil words and deeds of all kinds, so much so that he does not utter an offensive word even by way of retaliation. Thus a fasting person undergoes not only a physical discipline by curbing his bodily desires, the craving for food and drink, and the sex appetite, but he is actually required to undergo a direct moral discipline by avoiding all kinds of evil words and evil deeds. In the sight of God, **the fast loses its value not only by taking food or drink but also by telling a lie**, using foul language, acting unfaithfully, or doing an evil deed.

- In another hadith it is said that when the month of Ramadan commences:

“The doors of Heaven are opened and the doors of Hell are closed and the devils are put into chains.” (Bukhari, hadith 1899)

The devils are **chained** for the one who keeps the fast because he **curbs** and **chains** his lower passions — the desires which the devil arouses to make a person fall into

evil. The doors of Hell are **closed** on him because he **closes** the door on doing all evil which leads to hell. The doors of Heaven are **opened** for him because, by rising above physical desires and by devoting himself to the service of humanity, he **opens the door** to lead a new kind of life in this world.

The hadith we referred to above, under “punishment for deliberately breaking the fast” is hadith 1936 in Sahih Bukhari as follows:

Abū Hurairah said: We were sitting with the Prophet ﷺ, when a man came and said: “O Messenger of Allāh! I am ruined.” He asked: “What has happened to you?” He said: “I had sexual relations with my wife while I was fasting.”

The Messenger of Allāh ﷺ said: “Can you afford to (buy and) set a slave free?” He said: “No.” He said: “Can you fast for two successive months?” He said: “No.” He said: “Can you afford to feed sixty needy poor people?” He said: “No.”

Abū Hurairah added: The Prophet ﷺ kept quiet for a while. We were still like that when a bag containing dates was brought to him. He (the Holy Prophet) said: “Where is the questioner?” He said: “I am here.” He said: “Take this and give it in charity.” The man asked: “O Messenger of Allāh! Should I give it to someone poorer than me? By Allāh! There is no family between the two stony ends (of Madīnah) poorer than my family.” The Prophet ﷺ laughed until his teeth showed and then said: “Feed your family with it.”

Maulana Muhammad Ali comments on this as follows:

What great mercy is there in the teachings of the Holy Prophet! No doubt, his teachings impose hardships and difficulties by requiring prayer and fasting. Moreover, for infringing a rule of fasting a penalty has to be imposed. However, if a person acknowledges that he has disobeyed some commandment of Allāh, and is sincerely repentant, this incident shows how great the sympathy and mercy is with which he is treated. This clearly shows that the real purpose was to inculcate the spirit to abide by the Divine commandments, and it was not to impose difficulty and hardship.