

Some Aspects of fasting (5)

Friday Khutba by Dr Zahid Aziz, for Lahore Ahmadiyya UK, 14 May 2021

وَإِذَا سَأَلَكَ عِبَادِي عَنِّي فَإِنِّي قَرِيبٌ أُجِيبُ دَعْوَةَ الدَّاعِ إِذَا دَعَانِ فَلْيَسْتَجِيبُوا لِي وَلْيُؤْمِنُوا بِي
لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْشُدُونَ ﴿١٨٦﴾

“And when My servants ask you (O Prophet) concerning Me (God), surely I am near. I answer the prayer of the supplicant when he calls on Me, so they should hear My call and believe in Me that they may walk in the right way.” — ch. 2, v. 186

In my *khutbas* during Ramadan on aspects of fasting, I had not been able to cover a few points which I do now in this *khutba* on the day after *Eid-ul-Fitr*. The above verse occurs within the section of chapter 2 of the Holy Quran which deals with fasting during Ramadan. It clearly shows that attaining nearness to God is a major purpose of fasting in Ramadan. God is near us human beings in any case, whether we feel it or not. As the Quran says elsewhere:

“And certainly We created man, and We know what his mind suggests to him — and We are nearer to him than his life-vein” (50:16)

“... And know that Allah comes in between a man and his heart...” (8:24)

This obviously indicates an unimaginable nearness of God to every human being. A person can realize this fact through prayer, in particular prayers during the month of fasting when the idea of closeness of God is in the mind of the person fasting. According to the verse I read at the beginning about fasting, God takes the initiative in answering prayers, and man, in response, should answer the call of God, i.e., believe in and act on His teachings. God is holding out His hand for man to grasp. Therefore, closeness to God should not just be a vague feeling in a person’s heart and mind. It must be manifested in action by walking in the right way out of belief in God.

How does fasting create a feeling of nearness to God? One way is that we make a pledge with God to refrain from certain actions till a certain time. No one can find out if we broke that promise, but it is only God Who can see us all the time. That feeling, of God seeing us, is intensified in our hearts. People these days are very concerned about the gathering of their personal information by human agencies, such as governments or Internet companies, etc. But how many are concerned about surveillance by God? Just after the verse in which God says “and We are nearer to him than his life-vein”, it is said about man: “He does not utter (even) a word but there is by him a watcher at hand” (50:18). These “watchers” are said to be angels making a record of people’s deeds. Elsewhere it says in the Quran:

“Or do they think that We do not hear their secrets and their private discussions? Yes indeed, and Our messengers with them write down.” — ch. 43, v. 80

“No, but you call the Judgment a lie, and surely there are keepers over you, honourable recorders, they know what you do.” — ch. 82, v. 9–12

So Allah has vastly more information on us, which is fully complete and accurate, than any state or agency in the world can obtain. Moreover, He says He will hold us to account on the basis of these records. Yet human nature is such that even we who believe this about God are far less concerned about this than we are about some human agencies holding records about our activities, when in fact those agencies do not even have the power or resources to hold every individual to account as God does.

I also wanted to mention here the concept of very rigorous, austere and prolonged fasting by the great founders of religion. The man known as ‘Buddha’ was born as Prince Siddhartha, about 500 years before Jesus. He wanted to discover the truth about the purpose of life, and the moral and spiritual development of man. Priests told him that if you deprive the body of its comforts and needs, and test it with hardship and rigours, then your spirit will be strengthened and your mind will become enlightened to truth. So Buddha went to a forest and tried these ‘austerities’. This included severe

fasting, with very little intake of food and drink. As a result, Buddha became emaciated and extremely weak. Then he realized that in such a state of weakness he was unable to do anything. He learnt from this that **you have to follow the path of moderation** and not extreme deprivation. He called this the ‘Middle Way’ and said:

“From now on I will take the middle way. I shall neither starve my body nor feed it too richly, but will eat just what is needed and no more.”

Islam also teaches us to follow a middle way; for example, in eating and drinking, in spending money, in working for our physical needs and comforts, and also in performing acts of worship.

Although Buddha realized through extremely hard fasting that it doesn’t lead to any benefit, nonetheless his fasting brought him enlightenment and understanding. In a book entitled *Fasting: An Exceptional Human Experience*, by psychotherapist Dr Randi Fredricks, there is a section on *The Buddha’s fasting experience*. It says:

“The Buddha’s fasting experiences played a central role in the formation of Buddhism. ... The Buddha spoke highly of fasting and said that during his fasts ‘my soul becomes brighter, my spirit more alive in wisdom and truth’. ... some historians believe that the Buddha’s fasting experience was the spiritual vehicle for his enlightenment. ... His experience illustrates how the physiological and spiritual changes during a fast affect an individual over time: before, during, and afterward. Once the ascetic act is over, a spiritual awakening can occur.” (pages 241–242)

Buddha undertook severe fasting and eventually had to give it up. The Holy Prophet Muhammad also undertook severe and extensive fasting but he forbade his followers from doing the same as they would not be able to do it, nor would they achieve anything by it, but only harm themselves. He himself sometimes combined fasts together into one continuous fast. This practice is called *wiṣāl*. This is where a person fasting during the day continues fasting during the night as well, so that his next fast is joined to the previous fast without a break! But the Holy Prophet forbade others from doing it. It is reported in Bukhari that he forbade them from this practice

“out of mercy for them, and that their energy may remain, and because severity in religion is disapproved” (book: Fasting, ch. 47, above hadith 1961). In one hadith it is stated:

The Prophet said twice: “Be cautious of combining fasts.” It was said: “But you combine them.” He said: “While I spend the night, my Lord gives me food and drink. So undertake deeds of only the hardship for which you have the strength.” (Bukhari, hadith number 1966)

May Allah enable us to follow the middle path, neither neglecting our spiritual duties, nor over-indulging in them to the detriment of our worldly life, ameen.

بَارَكَ اللهُ لَنَا وَنَاوَنَكُمُ فِي الْقُرْآنِ الْعَظِيمِ، وَنَفَعَنَا وَإِيَّاكُمْ بِالْآيَاتِ وَالذِّكْرِ الْحَكِيمِ، إِنَّهُ تَعَالَى جَوَادٌ كَرِيمٌ
مَلِكٌ بَرٌّ رَوْفٌ رَحِيمٌ-
