

Why Do Muslims Fast? (part 2 of 2)

Description: The different levels of fasting: the libidinal, emotional level, psychological level, and spiritual levels.

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The Libidinal Level

The sexual instinct and drives (libido) are harnessed on this level of fasting. In these times where the media continually plays on sexual desires to promote and sell products, the ability to control these powerful desires is a plus. Fasting physically reduces sexual desires and the fact that the fasting person has to avoid anything which could stimulate him psychologically helps to further lower the libido. Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said:

"O youths, whoever among you is able to marry let him do so, for it restrains the eyes and protects the private parts. He who is unable to marry should fast, because it is a shield." (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari*)

By restraining oneself from sexual acts which are permissible, the fasting person makes it easier for himself to restrain himself from forbidden sexual acts when he is not fasting.

The Emotional Level

Fasting on this level involves controlling the many negative emotions which simmer in the human mind and soul. For example, among the most destructive emotions is anger. Fasting helps to bring this emotion under control. Prophet Muhammad, said:

"When one of you is fasting, he should abstain from indecent acts and unnecessary talk, and if someone begins an obscene conversation or tries to pick an argument, he should simply tell him, 'I am fasting.'" (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari*)

Thus, on this level, whatever negative emotions challenge the fasting person must be avoided. One must abstain from lewd conversation and heated arguments. Even when one is in the right, it is better to let that right go and keep one's emotional fast intact. Likewise, the negative emotion of jealousy is reduced, as every fasting person is reduced to the common denominator of abstinence; no one is externally superior to another in this regard.

The Psychological Level

This level helps the fasting person psychologically to control evil thoughts and trains

him or her, to some degree, how to overcome stinginess and greed. The Prophet was reported to have said:

"Allaah has no need for the hunger and the thirst of the person who does not restrain himself from telling lies and acting on them even while observing the fast." (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari*)

In this age of immediate gratification, when the things of the world are used to fulfill human needs and desires almost as soon as they have them the ability to delay gratification is an important skill. What is between immediate gratification and delayed gratification is patience. During the fast, the believers learn patience and the benefits of it.

From a psychological perspective, it is good to be somewhat detached from the things of the world. There is nothing wrong with enjoying a good and full life - in fact, one can and should expect that. However, it is important that people are able to detach ourselves from material things so that they do not become the most important part of their lives. Fasting gives one the opportunity to overcome the many addictions which have become a major part of modern life. Food, for many people, provides comfort and joy, and the ability to separate oneself from it gives the fasting people the psychological benefit of knowing that they do have some degree of control over what they do and what they do not do.

The Spiritual Level

In order to establish this, the highest and most important level of fasting, the level of God-consciousness, Prophet Muhammad made the renewal of the intention for fasting a requirement before every day of fasting. He was reported to have said:

"Whoever does not intend to fast before Fajr (the dawn) will have no fast." (*Abu Dawud*)

The daily renewal of intention helps to establish a spiritual foundation of sincerity essential for the spiritual cleansing effects of fasting to operate. Sincere fasting purifies and atones for sin, as the Prophet said:

"Whoever fasts Ramadan out of sincere faith and seeking his reward from God, his previous sins will be forgiven."

He was also reported to have said, "From one Ramadaan to the next is atonement for the sins between them." Sincere fasting brings one closer to Allaah and earns a special reward. The Prophet informed that there is a gate in paradise called Rayyaan reserved for those who fast and he also said:

"When Ramadan comes, the gates of Paradise are open." (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari*)

Fasting is primarily between the person and God, as no one can be sure that any person is actually fasting. Because of this intimate aspect of fasting, Allaah was quoted by the Prophet as saying:

"Every act of Aadam's descendants is for themselves, except fasting. It is meant for Me alone, and I alone will give the reward for it." (*Saheeh Muslim*)

When combined with the previous levels of fasting, this level transforms a person from within. It restores, revives and regenerates the fasting person's spirituality and radically modifies his or her personality and character. These are the precious products of a heightened state of God-consciousness.

On the first day of the following month, after another new moon has been sighted, a special celebration is made, called Id al-Fitr. A quantity of staple food is donated to the poor (Zakat al-Fitr), everyone has bathed and put on their best, preferably new, clothes, and communal prayers are held in the early morning, followed by feasting and visiting relatives and friends.

There are other fast days throughout the year. Muslims are encouraged to fast six days in Shawwal, the month following Ramadan, Mondays and Thursdays, and the ninth and tenth, or tenth and eleventh of Muharram, the first month of the year. The tenth day, called Ashurah, is also a fast day for the Jews (Yom Kippur), and Allah commanded the Muslims to fast two days to distinguish themselves from the People of the Book.

While fasting per se is encouraged, constant fasting, as well as monasticism, celibacy, and otherwise retreating from the real world, are condemned in Islam. Fasting on the two festival days, Id al-Fitr and Id al-Adha, the feast of the Hajj, is strictly forbidden.

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