



Multidimensional Benefits of Fasting

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Islām, being a fully-fledged, systematic and comprehensive code of life, enveloping all aspects of Man's affairs in the existing world, provides him with opportunities to enhance his momentary and mortal existence, with respect to his faculties of physique, psyche and soul. Speaking from a general point of view, Man is a creature, a creation, midway between beast and angel. He is superior to beasts in the sense that he possesses and controls an intellectual ability with which he may distinguish between right and wrong, pros and cons, advantages and disadvantages and rationalise for his own welfare. He is inferior to angels in the sense that material desire and concupiscence often overpower him, for which he has to strive hard to subdue. Thus, his disposition and temperament give way to propensities to incline either way. When the beast within Man is unleashed, he slips and falls and plunges rapidly into the abysmal darkness of spiritual and moral decline, and when that same beast is kept under check and strict restraint, under the natural laws of scientific and religious combination (Islām), that same 'beastly' Man gains the potential to a spiritual elevation high above the angels.

Islām, therefore, offers a beautiful remedy for such degrading maladies: spiritual, physical and mental, and that remedy is known as '*Sawm*' (fasting). It is a devotional exercise and one of the most solemn phenomena and manifestations of religion. It is an invitation to invest a few hours of earthly existence from the monotonous routine of filling one's belly with food and drink and seeking appeasement of the urges of the physique, and savouring the spiritual delicacies of hunger, thirst and other bodily restraints.

Over fourteen centuries, Allāh *jalla sha'nu-Hu* advised us in the following words:

*"yā ayyuha 'l-ladhīna āmanū kutiba 'alaykumu 'ṣ-ṣiyāmu kamā kutiba 'ala 'l-ladhīna min-qablikum la'allakum tattaqūn"*¹

O you who believe! *As-Ṣawm* (the fasting) has been prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, that you may (learn) *taqwa*².

¹ Majestic Qur'ān 2:183

² Self-restraint, God-wariness, humbleness, piety

And in the very next verse He says:

“*wa an-taṣūmū khayru ’l-lakum in-kuntum ta’lamūn*”³

...and that you fast is better for you if only you knew.

So, the Divine Creator has, as in every other field of our mortal life, guided us here also. An amalgamation of the interpretation of these two verses leads us to comprehend that *ṣawm* not only disciplines the general ‘self-restraint’ within ourselves but is also ‘better’ for us ‘if only we knew’. When observed from a general perspective, we see the ‘self-restraint’ and ‘betterment’ phenomena blending into the three dimensions of our mortal existence; mental, physical and spiritual. The people at F.C.I. (Fasting Center International, USA) say that “...fasting is humanity’s oldest, safest (biochemically), fastest, least invasive and most effective healing modality on all three levels – physiologically, psychologically and spiritually.”

Ṣawm, therefore, enhances the being of Man in all three perspectives in a parallel procedure and imparts to him a healthier, nobler and broader outlook of life, which revives in him the urge to fulfil the underlying objective and purpose of his creation.

Psychological Aspect

Let us begin with what the modern, non-Muslim scholars have perceived concerning the benefits of *ṣawm* with respect to its mental aspect.

Samuel Miller after enumerating the benefits of religious fasting, declares that it (*ṣawm* or fasting) “renders the mind more active, clear and vigorous.”⁴

Similarly, Avril Carruthers, 47, a psychotherapist in Sydney, Australia, after taking a fasting course, says, “Meditation was, and has remained, the most marked area of benefit.”

F.C.I. (Fasting Center International, USA) says that one of the benefits of fasting is that: “Cleaner and clearer thinking is produced by prolonged, scientific, therapeutic fasting.”

This is only what some of the people in the contemporary world are saying. Even those long ago, geniuses like Plato have been reported to have said, “I fast for greater physical and mental efficiency.”

Let us now see what earlier Muslim scholars have expounded.

Regarding the psychological aspect of Man, Imām al-Ghazālī *raḥmatu ’Llābi ta’ālā ’alayhi* has explained in great detail the benefits of *ṣawm*. He says that overeating makes one lazy, heat-blind and incurs heat in the brain like intoxication. He goes on to say that a full belly incites thirst and want of drink, which consequently curtails the mental faculty of one hundred percent efficiency by obscuring it with drowsiness.

³ Majestic Qur’ān 2:184

⁴ The Duty, the Benefits, and the Proper Methods of Religious Fasting – published in The National Preacher, Vol.15, No.10 (New York, March 1831), Sermons 98 and 99, pp. 145 – 160

Fasting, on the contrary, creates sleeplessness, makes the heart pure and the sight sharp. Contemplation and reasoning are more effective. Mental awareness and psychological vigilance are in full action, assisting the individual in his daily activities.⁵

Spiritual Aspect

In the spiritual aspect of one's life, *ṣawm* plays a positive role. It is this aspect of life that has accumulated piles of dust and rust in the modern era, and requires brushing and polishing. The material world has thrown spiritual life out of the window. The prevalent situation can be improved by practising the *ṣawm* and keeping all three avenues of one's being in a parallel motion, simultaneously.

On religious fasting, Samuel Miller says that it helps us in our lives by making them "systematically subservient to the purposes of charity."

Avril Carruthers says that: "In the spiritual practices in which I take part, theurgy (the art of invoking and connecting with high spiritual beings) is a large part. This, particularly, has become, and continues to be cosmic."

Imam al-Ghazālī *rahmatu 'Llāhi ta'ālā 'alayhi* states that hunger, which is an obvious conclusion of fasting, removes pride and enjoyments. Man, ultimately, realises his helplessness and the power and might of his Creator, which, as a consequence, makes him submissive. It causes easements in divine worship, and thus, increases in him his spiritual consciousness.⁶

Ṣawm, therefore, is most adequate when the soul of Man is in the experience of abysmal chaos due to over-indulgence of scoffing and swallowing. It allows him a rest from the material side of his being so that he may free his soul to awaken and contemplate on the spiritual position and rekindle his ethereal talents. Moreover, it assists us in heightening a clarity of consciousness and enhanced spirituality which we all-too-often forget we possess.

Likewise, Imam al-Ghazālī *rahmatu 'Llāhi ta'ālā 'alayhi* says that "it is well known that the object of fasting is to experience hunger and to check desire, in order to reinforce the soul in piety." He goes on to say, "the spirit and secret nature of fasting is to weaken the forces which are Satan's means of leading us back to evil. ...Moreover, one of the proprieties consists in taking little sleep during the daytime, so that one feels the hunger and thirst and becomes conscious of the weakening of one's powers, with the consequent purification of the heart."⁷

Physiological Aspect

The section of Man's being which experiences the greatest impact of the benefits of *ṣawm* (fasting) is most probably the physical aspect. Not only is the physique a laboratory for fasting, but also a metabolic organisation where the quantity and quality of edibles have a direct effect.

⁵ Imam al-Ghazālī - *Iḥyā 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, Book 3

⁶ Imam al-Ghazālī - *Inner Dimensions of Islamic Worship*

⁷ *Ibid.*

Suppose we take the body as a factory: suitable and unsuitable raw materials are admitted into it, the suitable ones are converted into favourable and useful substances and at the same time ensuring the long and active workability of all the mechanisms. On the contrary, the unsuitable raw materials can never guarantee a smooth flow from point 'A' to point 'B', nor can a healthy chemical reaction be ensured, i.e. clogging, blocking, settling of hazardous elements in the various components, etc. Furthermore, if the mechanical parts of that factory are made to run incessantly, the risk of jeopardising the whole system is imminent. But if given the appropriate rest to rewind itself, the efficiency and durability of all its mechanical components remains intact for a far longer period; exactly the same is with the human body.

Recent scientific readings have proven that by providing all digestive, assimilative and eliminative organs a much-needed rest, fasting also restores and normalises glandular, metabolic and nervous-system functions; speeds elimination of morbid accumulations, toxic wastes and of dead cells; accelerates new cell and tissue generation, and enhances cell-oxygenisation.

Samuel Miller⁸, again, says that “it administers essentially to the bodily health.”

Avril Carruthers says, “I loved the emptiness of the daily enemas, and experienced some pretty extraordinary, kundahali-type energy flows.... Aches and pains reduced (after the initial detoxification).”

Steve Glibb, 40, owner of a network marketing company in the U.S., says that he was seeking to break his sugar addiction; resolve his hypoglycaemia; rebalance his sleeping patten; drop some unnecessary weight, and detoxify, in the hopes of reversing blepharospasm (a chronic blinking of the eyelids). Well, what did he do? He fasted to a successful remedy for all his ailments.⁹

The Nobel Prize-winning French biologist and surgeon Dr. Alexis Carrel, who spent 34 of his professional years in the United States, described in his ‘Man, The Unknown’, the body’s rejuvenative and regenerative capability, inherent in its own detoxification process vis-à-vis scientific fasting: “Privation of food at first brings a sensation of hunger, occasionally some nervous stimulation, but it also determines certain hidden phenomena which are more important. The sugar of the liver and the fat of the subcutaneous deposits are mobilised, and also the proteins of the muscles and the glands ... in order to maintain blood, heart and brain in a normal condition. Fasting purifies and profoundly modifies our tissues.”¹⁰

Allāmah Ibn al-Qayyim says, “Fasting is most efficacious in the protection of the external limbs and internal organs. It guards against disorders resulting from the accumulation of the effete matter. It expels the toxins that are injurious to health and cures the ailments which develop in the body due to over-indulgence.”¹¹

⁸ The Duty, the Benefits, and the Proper Methods of Religious Fasting – published in The National Preacher, Vol.15, No.10 (New York, March 1831), Sermons 98 and 99, pp. 145 – 160

⁹ Fasting Center International, USA

¹⁰ Dr. Alex Carrel – Man, The Unknown

¹¹ Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah – Zād al-Ma‘ād

Imām al-Ghazālī *rahmatu 'Llāhi ta'ālā 'alayhi* states in his 'Iḥyā 'Ulūm al-Dīn' that due to fasting, a hungry man talks less, is therefore rescued from backbiting and also controls his material and sexual passions. In addition to little expense, due to less intake of food, his improvement and preservation of health and removal of diseases is a positive reaction of fasting.

Elson M. Haas, M.D., on describing the benefits of fasting has stated the following: "Fasting is a multi-dimensional experience. Physiologically, refraining from eating minimises the work done by the digestive organs, including the stomach, intestines, pancreas, gall bladder and liver. Most important here is that our liver, our body's largest production and metabolic factory, can spend more time during fasting cleaning up and creating its many new substances for our use. Breakdown of stored or circulating chemicals is the basic process of detoxification. The blood and lymph also have the opportunity to be cleaned of toxins as all eliminative functions are enhanced with fasting. Each cell has the opportunity to catch up on its work; with fewer new demands, it can repair itself and dump its waste for the garbage pickup."¹²

He has enlisted the following conditions for which fasting may be beneficial: cold, flu, bronchitis, headache, constipation, indigestion, diarrhoea, food allergies, environmental allergies, asthma, insomnia, skin conditions, atherosclerosis, coronary artery disease, angina pectoris, hypertension, diabetes, fever, fatigue, back pains, mental illness, obesity, cancer and epilepsy.¹³

We must, nevertheless, bear in mind that he states, "may be beneficial" and not, "shall be beneficial" which depends solely upon the physical and medical circumstances of the individual, which differ from person to person.

He also mentions the benefits of fasting which are: purification, rejuvenation, revitalisation, rest for digestive organs, clearer skin, anti-aging effects, improved senses (vision, hearing, taste, smell, touch), reduction of allergies, beneficial weight loss, drug detoxification, better resistance to disease, spiritual awareness, more energy, better sleep, more relaxation, better attitude, more mental and emotional clarity, inspiration, creativity, new ideas, clearer planning, positive change of habits, positive diet changes and right use of will.¹⁴

Today, scientific research is becoming aware of many such truths and unfolding such realities hidden in the mysteries of *ṣawm*. Hundreds of years ago, Hippocrates, Galen and Paracelsus concluded that: "Fasting is the greatest remedy – the physician within!" And remember when Plato said, "I fast for greater physical and mental efficiency." Historical evidence shows that all great intellectuals practiced prolonged fasting, geniuses such as Plato, Aristotle, Hippocrates, Paracelsus, Plato, Galen, and countless Muslim sages and scholars. This takes us back to the verses we quoted earlier:

*"yā ayyuha 'l-ladhīna āmanū kutiba 'alaykumu 'ṣ-ṣiyāmu kamā kutiba 'ala 'l-ladhīna min-qablikum la'allakum tattaqūn"*¹⁵

¹² Healthworld-online

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Majestic Qur'ān 2:183

O you who believe! As-Şawm (the fasting) has been prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, that you may (learn) *taqwā*.

*“wa an-taşūmū khayru ’l-lakum in-kuntum ta’lamūn”*¹⁶

...and that you fast is better for you if only you knew.

The wisdom and philosophy of *şawm* should now be more express as we have concisely touched the three perspectives of the prism of human life in the light of the Glorious Qur’ān and modern scientific thought.

Not only is *şawm* the bridle of the God-fearing, the shield of the *Mujāhids* and the discipline of the Virtuous, but also the protection for all the aspects of one’s being from the ailments of this world and a panacea for the afflictions in phenomena of the physique (body), the psyche (mind) and the soul.



¹⁶ Majestic Qur’ān 2:184