

Fast 3: Fasting in Islam — Its purposes

“O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may guard against evil.”
(The Holy Quran, 2:183)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ
الصِّيَامُ كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِن
قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٨٣﴾

- The first purpose of fasting is to enable us to develop and strengthen our powers of self-control. This means that we can resist wrongful desires and bad habits, and therefore “guard against evil”.
- In fasting, by refraining from the natural human urges to satisfy one’s appetite, we are exercising our ability of self-restraint. The more you exercise any ability or skill, the more developed it becomes. Then the power of self-restraint developed through fasting **must be applied in normal daily life** to bring about self-improvement.
- Seeking food, drink and sex are the basic, most deeply-ingrained instincts of an animal, including human beings. Therefore, in fasting we are tested with having to show control in face of **the strongest possible inner urges**.
- Fasting is a reminder that real and true human life is something higher than satisfying physical desires. That true life is attained by connecting the human soul with God and by having sympathy for those who are in need in any way, and practically helping them.
- Fasting creates a feeling of nearness to God. We make a promise with God to refrain from certain actions till a certain time. No one can know if we broke that promise, but it is only God Who can see us all the time. That feeling is intensified in our hearts. People these days are very concerned about surveillance by human agencies (such as governments). How many of us are concerned about surveillance by God Who says in the Quran:

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

“And certainly We created man, and We know what his mind suggests to him — and We are nearer to him than his life-vein. ...

كَلَّا بَلْ تُكَذِّبُونَ بِالذِّبَانِ ﴿٩﴾ وَإِنَّ عَلَيْكُمْ
حَافِظِينَ ﴿١٠﴾ كِرَامًا كَاتِبِينَ ﴿١١﴾ يَعْلَمُونَ
مَا تَفْعَلُونَ ﴿١٢﴾
وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ وَنَعْلَمُ مَا تُوَسْوِسُ
بِهِ نَفْسُهُ ﴿١٣﴾ وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ حَبْلِ
الْوَرِيدِ ﴿١٤﴾

He does not utter (even) a word but there is by him a watcher at hand.”
(50:16 and 18)

مَا يَلْفِظُ مِنْ قَوْلٍ إِلَّا لَدَيْهِ رَقِيبٌ عَتِيدٌ

﴿١٨﴾

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

أَمْ يَحْسَبُونَ أَنَّا لَا نَسْمَعُ سِرَّهُمْ وَنَجْوَاهُمْ ط
بَلَىٰ وَرُسُلْنَا لَدَيْهِمْ يَكْتُبُونَ ﴿٨٠﴾

- Allah says in connection with fasting in Ramadan:

“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.” (2:186)

وَإِذَا سَأَلَكَ عِبَادِي عَنِّي فَإِنِّي قَرِيبٌ ط
أَجِيبْ دَعْوَةَ الدَّاعِ إِذَا دَعَا ل
فَلْيَسْتَجِيبُوا لِي وَلْيُؤْمِنُوا بِي لَعَلَّهُمْ
يَرْشُدُونَ ﴿١٨٦﴾

God is near in any case, whether we feel it or not. 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. God takes the initiative in answering prayers, and says that 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 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.

- It is important to remember that fasting in Islam does not just consist of refraining from eating and drinking, but in fact from every kind of selfish desire and wrongdoing. The fast is not merely of the body, but essentially that of the spirit as well. The physical fast is a symbol and outward expression of the real, inner fast. We are saying: “I am refraining from all wrong actions that I *desire* to do, by refraining from my deepest physical desires”. The Holy Prophet said:

“He who does not give up uttering falsehood and acting according to it, God has no need of his giving up his food and drink.”

مَنْ لَمْ يَدَعْ قَوْلَ الزُّورِ وَالْعَمَلَ بِهِ فَلَيْسَ بِلِلَّهِ
حَاجَةً فِي أَنْ يَدَعَ طَعَامَهُ وَشَرَابَهُ