

Fast 16: Prophets and Messengers of Allah — Buddha's fasting

- The man known as 'Buddha' was, in fact, given this title after he became 'the enlightened one'. He was born as Prince Siddhartha, about 500 years before Jesus. He wanted to discover the truth about the purpose of life, and 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 is strengthened and your mind becomes 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, he became emaciated and extremely weak. Then he realized that in such a state of weakness he could not achieve anything. Someone offered him some food and he accepted it. Strengthened by this, he realized that **one must 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." It was then that he sat under the Bodhi tree and meditated until he attained to 'enlightenment'.
- We can see parallels with the raising to prophethood of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, which is known as his *bi'tha*. He used to retreat to the cave of Hira and in solitude there he used to pray, fast and meditate. Those experiences led to his appointment by Allah as His Prophet. He too taught the middle way and the Muslims are said in the Quran to be *ummat-an wasat-un* — "a middle community" (2:143).

- Buddha's experience is also in line with the following verse of the Quran:

"Is he who was dead, then We raised him to life and made for him a light by which he walks among the people, like him whose likeness is that of one in darkness from which he cannot come forth?" (6:122)

أَوْ مَنْ كَانَ مَيِّتًا فَأَحْيَيْنَاهُ وَجَعَلْنَا لَهُ نُورًا
يَمْشِي بِهِ فِي النَّاسِ كَمَنْ مَثَلَهُ فِي الظُّلُمَاتِ لَيْسَ
بِخَارِجٍ مِنْهَا

Buddha was indeed almost dead due to his severe fasting, but the realization came to him that he must follow the middle path. So he took some food and drink, and came to life not only physically but also achieved spiritual life and awakening. He was given a light for people, and he is himself known as the 'light of Asia'.

- Buddha attained his enlightenment, not during fasting, but after ending it. This does not mean that he could have attained his goal without fasting! In a book entitled *Fasting: an Exceptional Human Experience*, there is a section on *The Buddha's fasting experience*. We quote below from it:

“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. ... The Buddha’s fasting experiences were nothing short of transformational.” (p. 241, 242)

The author explains that the spiritual benefits due to fasting also occur after the fasting is over:

“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 ... This phenomenon can feel particularly enormous after the fast is broken and when refeeding occurs.” (p. 242)

- The mention above of the end of fasting reminds one of the following hadith of the Holy Prophet Muhammad:

“The person who fasts has two pleasures which he enjoys: when he breaks the fast he is pleased, and when he will meet His Lord he will be pleased because of his fasting.” (Bukhari, hadith number 1904)

The pleasure at breaking of the fast cannot just mean that the person feels relieved and happy that his ordeal of hunger and thirst is over! The breaking of the fast is a part of the experience of fasting, and it brings not only physical comfort and relief but a further spiritual awakening, as Buddha discovered. The mention in this hadith of meeting His Lord is not only after death but attaining closeness to Him by fasting.

- As mentioned above, Buddha undertook severe fasting and eventually had to give it up. The Holy Prophet Muhammad forbade his followers from extensive and severe fasting as they would not be able to do it, nor will they achieve anything by it. He himself sometimes combined fasts together into one, which 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.” 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)

He meant that during the night Allah gives him spiritual food and drink, which makes up for the absence of physical nourishment. This is clearly only the case with the great prophets of God. Interestingly, Buddha said that, during his period of spiritual exertions mentioned above, when he was considering refraining altogether from food and drink, he was approached by “some divinities” (i.e., angels) who said to him: “Do not refrain altogether from food. If you do so, we will feed you with divine food through the pores of your hair and with this keep you alive” (*The Life of Buddha*, by Edward Thomas, 1949 edition, p. 65).