

Fast 6: Fasting — Prophet Isaiah and Buddha

- There was a prophet called Isaiah, between the times of Moses and Jesus. His people, the Israelites or Jews, complained to him that God had not seen or noticed that they had been fasting, and had not removed their troubles. God gave Isaiah the answer to their complaint, which was this:

“Look, at the same time you fast, you satisfy your selfish desires, you oppress your workers. Look, your fasting is accompanied by arguments, brawls, and fistfights. Do not fast as you do today, trying to make your voice heard in heaven. Is this really the kind of fasting I want? Do I want a day when people merely humble themselves, bowing their heads like a reed and stretching out on sackcloth and ashes? Is this really what you call a fast, a day that is pleasing to the Lord?

No, this is the kind of fast I want. I want you to remove the sinful chains, to tear away the ropes of the burdensome yoke, to set free the oppressed, and to break every burdensome yoke. I want you to share your food with the hungry and to provide shelter for homeless, oppressed people. When you see someone naked, clothe him! Don't turn your back on your own flesh and blood! Then your light will shine like the sunrise; your restoration will quickly arrive; your godly behaviour will go before you, and the Lord's splendour will be your rear guard. Then you will call out, and the Lord will respond; you will cry out, and he will reply, 'Here I am.' You must remove the burdensome yoke from among you and stop pointing fingers and speaking sinfully. You must actively help the hungry and feed the oppressed. Then your light will dispel the darkness, and your darkness will be transformed into noonday.” (Isaiah, 58:3–10)

This, then, is the kind of fasting that prophets of Allah taught, and of course the same kind of fasting is required by Islam, as stated in the Quran and as shown by the Holy Prophet Muhammad in his life.

- 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 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, Buddha became emaciated and extremely weak. Then he realized that in such a state of weakness he could not achieve 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 in performing acts of worship.

- 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?” — ch. 6, v. 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’.

- Although Buddha realized through extremely hard fasting that it doesn’t lead to any benefit, but fasting as such brought him enlightenment and understanding. In a book entitled *Fasting: an Exceptional Human Experience*, 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)

- The experiences of these earlier prophets bear out the statement in the Quran that fasting has been prescribed for Muslims *as it was prescribed for those before them* (ch. 2, v. 183), meaning in the earlier religions.