

The Uncovering of the Seventh Veil: On Fasting (*al-ṣawm*)

‘Alī b. ‘Uthmān al-Hujwirī ‘Dāta Ganj Baksh’

ALLAH ﷻ HAS SAID IN THE HOLY QURAN: “O BELIEVERS! FASTING IS PRESCRIBED FOR you...” (*al-Baqara* 179). And the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said that he was informed by Jibrīl ﷺ that Allah ﷻ said: “Fasting is mine and I have the best right to give recompense for it.” (*al-ṣawm li wa anā ajza bihi*) Because the religious practice is a mystery unconnected to any external thing; a mystery that in which none other than Allah participates: hence its recompense is infinite. It has been said that believers enter paradise through Allah’s mercy, and that their rank therein depends on their religious devotion, and that their abiding therein forever is the recompense of their fasting, because Allah said: “I have the best right to give recompense for it.” Junayd said: “Fasting is half of the way.” I have seen shaykh’s who fasted without intermission (break) and others who fasted only in the month of Ramaḍān: the former were seeking recompense and the latter were renouncing self-will and ostentation. Again I have seen others who fasted and were not conscious of anyone and ate only when food was set before them. This is more in accordance with the *Sunnah*. It is related that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ came to ‘Āisha and Ḥafṣa, may Allah be well pleased with thme both, who said to him: “We have kept some dates and butter (hays) for you.” “Bring it” said the Prophet ﷺ, “I was intending to fast but I will fast another day instead.” I have seen others who fasted on the “white days” (i.e. the 13, 14 and 15 of a lunar month when the moon is fullest and thus brightest) and on the ten of the blessed month of *Dhu’l Hajj* and also during *Rajab*; *Sha’bān* and Ramadan. Others I have seen who observed the fast of David which the Messenger of Allah ﷺ called the best of fasts. I.e. they fasted one day and broke their fast the next day.

Once I came in the presence of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Bukhārī. He had a dish of sweetmeat (*ḥalwā*) before him, from which he was eating, and he made a sign to me that I should do the same. As is the way of young men, I answered (without consideration) that I was fasting. He asked why. I said: “In conformity with such and such a one.” He said: “It is not right for human beings to conform with human beings.” I was about to break my fast, but he said: “Since you wish to be quit of conformity with him, do not conform with me, for I too am human.”

Fasting is really abstinence and this includes the whole method of Sufism (*tarīqat*). The least degree in fasting is hunger, which is Allah’s food on earth and is universally commended in the eye of law and reason. One month’s continual fasting is obligatory on every reasonable Muslim who has attained puberty. The fast begins on the appearance of the new crescent moon of Ramadan and continues until the appearance of the new crescent of Shawwāl and for every day a sincere intention and firm obligation is necessary. Abstinence involves many obligations. Keeping the stomach without food and drink and guarding the eye from lustful looks and the ear from listening to evil speech about anyone in his absence and the tongue from vain or foul words and the body from following after worldly things and disobedience to Allah. One who acts in this manner is truly keeping his fast for the Messenger of Allah said to a certain man, “When you fast, let your ear fast and your eye fast and your tongue and your hand and every limb;” and he also said “many a one has no good of fasting except hunger and thirst.”

I dreamed that I saw the Messenger of Allah ﷺ and asked him to give me counsel and that he replied: “Imprison your tongue and your senses.” To imprison the senses is complete self-mortification because all kinds of knowledge are acquired through the five senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. Four of the five senses have a particular locus but the fifth namely touch is spread all over the body. Everything that becomes known to human beings passes through these five doors except intuitive knowledge and divine inspiration, and in each of the five senses there is purity and an impurity; for just as they are open to imagination and passion, being organs which partake of piety and sin and of felicity and misery. Therefore it befits him who is keeping a fast to imprison all the senses in to order that they may return from disobedience to obedience. To abstain only from food and drink is child’s play. One must abstain from idle pleasures and unlawful acts not from eating lawful food. I marvel at those who say that they are keeping a voluntary fast and yet fail to perform an obligatory duty. Not to commit sin is obligatory whereas continual fasting is a Prophetic practice (which may be observed or not). When a man is divinely protected from sin all his circumstances are a fast. It is related by Abu Ṭalhā al-Mālikī that Sahl b. ‘Abdullah al-Tustarī was fasting on the day of his birth and also on the day of his death, because he was born in the morning and tasted no milk until sunset that day and on the day of his passing he was keeping a fast. But continual fast (*wiṣāl*), has been forbidden by the Messenger of Allah ﷺ for when he fasted continually (for days at a time with no *Iftār/suḥūr* in between) and his Companions began to imitate him in that respect he forbade them saying, “I am not as one of you. I pass the night with my Lord who gives me food and drink.” The devotees of self-mortification assert that this prohibition was an act of indulgence not a veto declaring such fasts to be unlawful, and others regard them as being contrary to the *Sunnah* but the fact is that continuance (*wiṣāl*) is impossible because the day’s fast is interrupted by night, or at any rate, does not continue beyond a certain period. It is related that Sahl b. ‘Abdullah al-Tustarī used to eat only once in fifteen days, and when the month of Ramadan arrived ate nothing until the Feast (i.e. *‘Īd al-fiṭr*), and performed four hundred *rak‘ats* every night. This exceeds the limits of human endurance, and cannot be accomplished by anyone without divine aid which itself becomes his nourishment.

It is well known that Shaykh Abu Naṣr, the author of *Luma* who was surnamed the peacock of the poor (*ta’us al-fuqarā’*) came to Baghdad in the month of Ramadan and was given a private chamber in the Shuniziyya Mosque and was appointed to preside over the dervishes until the Feast (*‘Īd*). During the night prayers (*tarāwīḥ*) he recited the whole Quran five times. Every night a servant brought a loaf of bread to his room. When he departed on the day of *‘Īd* the servant found all thirty loaves of bread untouched. ‘Alī b. Bakkār relates that *Hafs Missisi* ate nothing in Ramadan except on the fifteenth evening of the month. We are told that Ibrāhīm b. Adham fasted from the beginning to the end of Ramadan and although it was the month of *Tammuz* (July) worked every day as a harvester and gave his wages to the dervishes and prayed from nightfall to daybreak. They watched him closely and saw that he neither ate nor slept. It is said that Shaykh Abu ‘Abdullah Khafīf during his life kept forty uninterrupted fasts of forty days and I have met with an old man who used annually to keep two fasts of forty days in the desert. I was presented at the deathbed of Danishmand Abu Muhammad Bangharī he had tasted no food for eighty days and had not missed a single occasion of public (congregational) prayer. At Merv there were two spiritual directors; one was called Mas‘ūd and the other was Shaykh Abu ‘Alī Siyah. Mas‘ūd sent a message to the other saying: “how long shall we make empty pretensions? Come let us sit fasting for forty days.” Abu ‘Alī replied: “No, let us eat three times a day and nevertheless require just one

purification (*wuḍū*) during those forty days.” The difficulties of this question are not yet removed. Ignorant persons conclude that continuance in fasting is possible while physicians allege that such a theory is entirely baseless. I will now explain the matter in full. To fast continuously without break infringing the divine command is a miracle (*karāma*). Miracles have a special not general application: if they were granted to all, faith would be an act of necessity (*jabr*) and the Gnostics would not be recompensed on account of gnosis. The Messenger of Allah ﷺ produced evidentiary miracles (*muʿjiza*) and therefore divulged his continuance of fasting but he forbade the saints (*ahl al-karāma*) to divulge it, because a *karāma* involves concealment whereas a *muʿjiza* involves revelation. This is a clear distinction between the miracles performed by the Messengers of Allah ﷺ and those performed by saints and will be sufficient for anyone who is divinely guided. The forty days fast (*chilla*) of the saints is derived from the fast of Mūsā ؑ. When the saints desire to hear the word of Allah spiritually they remain fasting for forty days. After thirty days have passed they rub their teeth then they fast ten days more and Allah ﷻ speaks to their hearts because whatever the Prophets enjoy openly the saints may enjoy secretly. Now hearing the word of Allah is not compatible with the subsistence of the natural temperament: therefore the four human temperaments must be deprived of food and drink for forty days in order that they may be utterly subdued and that the purity of love and the subtlety of the spirit may hold absolute sway.

Chapter on Hunger and matters associated with it

Allah ﷻ has said in the Quran: **“And we will surely test you with some fear and hunger, and with loss of wealth and lives and crops, and give glad tidings to those that patiently endure.”** Hunger sharpens the intelligence and improves the mind and health. The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: “Make your stomach hungry and your liver thirsty and your bodies naked that perchance your hearts may see Allah in this world.” Although hunger is an affliction to the body, it illuminates the heart and purifies the soul and leads the spirit into the presence of Allah. To eat ones fill is an act worthy of a beast. One who cultivates his spiritual nature by means of hunger in order to devote himself entirely to Allah ﷻ and detach himself from worldly ties, is not on the same level as one who cultivates his body by means of gluttony and serves his lusts. “The men of old ate to live, but you live to eat.” For the sake of a morsel of food Adam fell from Paradise and was banished far from the neighbourhood of God. He whose hunger is compulsory is not really hungry because one who desires to eat after Allah ﷻ has decreed the contrary is virtually eating; the merit of hunger belongs to him who abstains from eating not to him who is debarred from eating. Kattānī says: “The novice shall sleep only when he is overpowered by slumber and speak only when he must, and eat only when he is starving.” According to some, starvation (*faqā*) involves abstention from food for two days and two nights; others say three days and three nights; or a week or forty days, because a true mystics believe that a sincere man is only once hungry in forty days; his hunger merely serves to keep him alive and all hunger besides his natural appetite and vanity. You must know that all the veins in the bodies of Gnostics are evidences of the divine mysteries and that their hearts are tenanted by visions of the Most High. Their hearts are doors open in their chests and at these doors are stationed reason and passion. Reason is reinforced by the spirit, and passion by the lower soul. The more the natural humours are nourished by food the stronger does the lower soul become and the more impetuously is passion diffused through the organs of the body and in every vein a different kind of vein is produced. But

when food is withheld from the lower soul it grows weak and the reason grows strength and the mysteries and evidences of Allah become more visible until when the lower soul is unable to work and passion is annihilated, every vain desire is effaced in the manifestation of the truth and the seeker of Allah ﷻ attains the whole of his desire. It is related that Abu'l 'Abbās Qassāb said: “my obedience and disobedience depends on two cakes of bread. When I eat I find myself the stuff of every sin but when I abstain from it I find myself the foundation of every act of piety.” The fruit of hunger is contemplation of Allah ﷻ (*mushāhadāt*) of which the forerunner is mortification (*mujāhadāt*). Repletion combined with contemplation is better than hunger combined with mortification because contemplation is the battlefield of men whereas the mortification is the playground of children.

