



The Hidden Sweetness of the Fast

By John Herlihy



"Oh those who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you so that you may learn heedfulness. (Quran, 2:183)

During the holy month of Ramadhan, the Muslims undergo the rigors of the fast as a spiritual discipline of ritual denial of the pleasure of taste in the consciousness that true hunger is actually the prelude to a higher experience of consciousness in fair compensation to the rigors of the fast. Rumi, the Sufi poet, wrote: "There's hidden sweetness in the stomach's emptiness." Small wonder, then, that the fasting person comes to learn of a sweetness never experienced before in the virtue of taste.

In counterpoint to fine culinary dining and the savoring of exotic drinks, the Islamic traditions turn the sense of taste inside out through the Islamic fast based on the premise that hunger rather than satiation of the senses will turn the mind away from the temptations of the sensible world to the inner world of higher experience. The eye of the heart and the intellect opens wide and the sheer experience of formal denial of the taste experience, at least for a temporary and limited time frame, will open a door to the conscious experience of a higher order. When the Muslims set out to systematically deny the pleasures of the sense of taste, they put their surrender into an action that is the direct expression of their will to surrender to the commands of Allah.

Muslims the world over fast during the lunar month of Ramadhan first and foremost because Allah has asked them to do so in the verses of the Quran. When the Divinity asks, the true Muslim complies. If this were the only reason why they fast, it would be reason enough. Muslims believe the Quran to be the direct communication of the Divine Being to mankind, a revelation that provides the essential knowledge they need to know in order to realize their spirituality as a living spirituality within their beings. It is not, however, the only reason. The Islamic fast has a spiritual significance and efficacy that ranges from purely external benefits to profoundly internal blessings. Embedded within the ritual of fasting, however, lies a spiritual meaning, a

human secret, and a divine promise that forms the rationale and purpose of the entire body experience of the fast.

In its external manifestation, the fast of Ramadhan is a well known phenomenon. Most people know that fasting calls to a halt the satisfaction of the appreciative sense of taste for a specific time period from the call to prayer at the first light of dawn until the call to prayer at sunset. The rhythm of normal life is sharply interrupted, while the Muslims adapt themselves to the routine of self denial implicit in the fast. The fast is an intense physical experience in which the body experiences a kind of death to the satisfaction of the senses, in keeping with the traditional saying (*hadith*) of the Prophet: "Die before you die."

The fast of Ramadhan is a form of worship in which the body itself offers up its own prayer as it passes through a netherworld that denies all sense experience relating to taste. Because of its message of effort and self discipline, the fast is a most effective way of conquering the evil within us. The Prophet of Islam has said: "Satan affects the sons of Adam by pervading his blood. Let him therefore make this difficult for Satan by means of hunger." The fast denies the senses their natural satisfaction because they are the "grazing ground" of the devil. As long as the senses are fertile, the devil will continue to frequent them and as long as he frequents them, the majesty of God will not be revealed to the human consciousness." Had it not been for the fast," the Prophet said, "the devils would hover around the heart of the children of Adam when in truth the fast would have lifted their hearts unto the kingdom of Heaven." For this reason, the Prophet also told his favorite wife, Aisha, "Persist in knocking on the door of Paradise." When she asked how, the Prophet replied: "With hunger."

The physical efficacy of the fast has been well documented down through history, and most religious traditions have encouraged fasting. Even the secular societies of the West recognize the benefits of the fast and have included fasting as an important factor in the pursuit of good nutrition and health. In fact, fasting has been called "the bread of the prophets" because it is virtually a prayer of the body. Fasting helps the body to purify itself of the toxins that accumulate through over-indulgence of tasty foods that sometimes result in incomplete digestion. The resulting purification leaves the body in a more refined state of physical readiness and awareness. Through denial, the physical senses are actually heightened; some of the veils that separate us from the higher realities may be lifted and the remembrance (*dikhr*) of Allah is brought clearer into focus. The body itself goes through a process of fine tuning, so that a person can begin to listen to the message that the body has to convey. As Rumi, a well known Islamic mystic from the 13th century wrote in one of his poems: "If the brain and belly are burned clean with fasting, every moment a new song comes out of the fire."

Beyond the limits of the external fast lies the internal fast. Internal fasting imposes a discipline on the mind and heart. The inner self is restrained from indulging in passions and desires that go beyond the physical senses to affect one's personality and inner psyche. These are the inner evils such as lying, backbiting, envy, jealousy, anger or pride. "Cultivate within yourself," the Prophet said, "the attributes of Allah." The internal fast transcends the physical limitations

of an individual and amounts to imitating the qualities of God. With its inward focus, the fast weakens the knots of the psyche, controls the negative emotions of the personality, and strengthens the human will that initiates the fast in the first place. In this way, the human spirit becomes stronger both outwardly through control over the senses and innerly by focusing the mind and transcending the limitations of the psyche. Those who do not fulfill the minimum conditions of both the outer and inner fast are the people about whom the Prophet has said, "There are many whose fasting is nothing beyond being hungry and thirsty."

Of all the earthly duties, the fast of Ramadhan is the most secret because it is strictly between the individual and God. The fast by its very nature is an act of honor and a secret pledge between man and God. The prayer rituals, the *zakat* payment and the Hajj pilgrimage are all open to plain view and subject to comment and approval by the community, whereas the fast is the one act of worship that is witnessed only by God. People who fast cannot prove their veracity and need not do so; rather they share their secret with no one but the only One, in obedience to God and for His sake only.

All five pillars of Islam have the remembrance of Allah as their fundamental motive and purpose. This is obvious in the first duty, the proclamation of faith (*shahadah*), which is the perpetual remembrance of the one God and the one Reality. According to the Prophet, the prayer is the "key to Paradise". By observing the *zakat* or giving of alms, the Muslims remember Allah through their earnings. The pilgrimage brings us back physically as well as spiritually to the center of the world, the Ka'ba in Makka, which is also the symbol of the inward center, the heart, which is the place where the remembrance of God becomes a meeting ground and a reality. Finally, the main purpose of the fast is the achievement of a state of detachment from the world through the outright denial of the senses, in order to create a space within the mind and heart for the "remembrance" (*dhikr*) of Allah. This is perhaps the greatest and most immediate benefit of the fast, for Allah has said: "Remember Me and I will remember you" (2: 152).

The fast of Ramadhan ultimately contains a meaning, a blessing, and a promise that extends far beyond human expectations or experience. "Fasting is for Me and I shall grant reward for it Myself." In compensation for the human effort of the fast, the divine promise has both an outer and an inner aspect. The two joys of fasting are the *Iftar* or "break-fast" meal that concludes the fast and the vision of the new moon that signals the *Eid* at the termination of Ramadhan. The inner blessing is what modern psychological terminology would call a higher consciousness or "presence of mind" together with a feeling of serenity and peace that accompanies any strong effort of human will, in this case a virtual surrender to the Will of God. In Quranic terminology, this is called *tatma'inn al-qulub*, a peace that descends upon the hearts of the believers from above as a foretaste of the ultimate divine promise, namely the joy of seeing the paradise (*jannah*) after death and the beneficence of having the vision of God after resurrection.