

# Philosophy of Fasting in Quran and Islamic Narratives and its Relationship with Human Health, Based on Scientific Notions

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## ABSTRACT

Abstinence from eating and drinking on long hot summer days is no easy task. In fact, it is considered the greatest "Jihad" in Islamic tradition. Here, the main question is concerned with the importance of fasting, its purposes, and advantages for individuals. We need to determine if fasting plays a role in overcoming human problems. This article, by using an analytical approach, states Quranic verses and Hadiths and reviews the philosophy of fasting in response to two questions: 1) What is the philosophy of fasting in Quran and Hadiths?, and 2) What role does it play in maintaining human health? Therefore, Islamic verses and narratives, concerning the importance of fasting in maintaining health, are reviewed, using the opinions of some scientists.

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## Introduction

Blind worship is prohibited in Quran, and as the Lord says, "Follow not that of which you have not the knowledge" (2).

Religious teachings of Quran are based on knowledge, reasoning, and logic. Quran not only argues to prove theoretical principles, but also provides reasons for practical issues such as acts of worship and ordinance.

With an overall review of Quran, it is revealed that the purpose of all God's commands is to guide people toward the ways of safety (salama): "From God, came to you light and the book. Allah guides him who will follow His pleasure into the ways of safety and brings him out of utter darkness into light by His will and guides him to the right path" (2).

"Salama" in Arabic means being healthy and

not affected. Teachings of prophets (particularly in Islam and Quran), as the first instructors of human society, aim to promote physical and spiritual health. In a narration by Prophet Muhammad, the philosophy of fasting is introduced as maintaining human's healthy: "fast and be healthy" (3).

This philosophy is approved by existentialist philosophers such as Kierkegaard, and psychologist of being, as Maslow, Frankl,

In this regard, Frankl says: "Religion may have a positive effect on mental health and it can enhance inner balance and mental health (4). As Maslow remarks: "Psychology teaches us that human being needs religion in about the same sense that he needs sunlight or calcium" (5), and pragmatic philosophers including William

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James. As James states, "Concepts and theories, which have advantageous results for human, have a sense of reality in them" (6).

### ***Philosophy of fasting in Al-Baqarah (verse 183) and other Hadiths***

In one of two verses (7) explaining the philosophy of fasting, the purpose of this practice is to achieve abstinence: "Believers, fasting is decreed for you as it was decreed for those before you; perchance you will be cautious" (7).

In this verse, the objective of fasting is to achieve piety. Piety, coming from the Arabic root "wa-qa-ya", refers to self-restraint and abstinence (8). In Quranic terms, piety is the origin of all moral virtues, and without it, attaining other virtues is impossible; thus, it is introduced as a factor for human happiness (9).

Allameh Tabatabai's interpretation of this verse is as follows: "There is no doubt that the purpose of fasting is to achieve piety. If a man refrains from legitimate interests, his willpower will be enforced" (10).

According to Quran, humans have free will and are architects of their own personalities. Special abilities have been bestowed upon people by God and other creatures seem to lack these features. Human is responsible for creating his own character and this world is his playground. He can either ascend to a divine status or descend into degeneration.

According to Quran, one of the main causes of human downfall is losing rational control over impulses, instincts, and feelings. Therefore, if one yields to his instinctive impulses, his downfall and depravity is imminent. As Dr. Frankl believes, there are two paths one can take regarding human freedom, which is the common feature of all people; the right way is fulfilling moral responsibilities in order to avoid deprecation (11).

According to Quran, in order to achieve noble human ideals and goals, one should not allow his desires, instincts, and impulses to rule over (12). In fact, one should master his own existence and dominate his instincts and emotions. Contrary to Freud's beliefs, human has the ability to freely decide on the acceptance or rejection of instinctive tendencies. Dr. Frankl believes conscious domination of instinctive impulses to be one of the positive features of

human character (13). This is the reason why the meanings of piety and felicity are so closely attached, according to Quran (14).

Certainly, reaching this level of control, called piety, is not easy and requires mental practice. In various narratives have been discussed the philosophy of morality and be used an analytical approach. The Prophet said: "Fasting is a shield against harms" (15), since it reinforces human nature to control himself against hardships and crisis". He also states: "Fasting is 'Zakat' of the body. It is in fact a means of physical and spiritual refining of the body"(16). The person who fasts is in full awareness and abstains from what may cause physical or moral harm; thereby, he guarantees his own health.

Not only from the perspective of religious philosophers but also in the atheist front, piety (defined as self-control and self-mastery) is of great importance. In this regard, Nietzsche believes that resistance against ambitions brings power, which is the source of all good traits. Without realizing the power of humankind, we cannot expect any good from him. Submission of a foul person to the demands of lust is definite. However, a virtuous person has the strength to resist lustful desires; Nietzsche names this kind of person as "Übermensch" or "super human" (17).

### ***Philosophy of fasting in Al-Baqarah (verse 184) and other Hadiths***

"And that you fast is good for you if you know" (7).

In this verse, philosophy of fasting is its benefit and advantage for humans. Let us first examine the meaning of good.

Good in ethics refers benefit and profit (18). Ibn Sina defines good as a means for achieving perfection. Khaje Nasir Toosi puts it another way: "Achieving something for a purpose that is suitable and best for man" (19). Considering the meaning of good in this holy verse, it is inferred that fasting is expedient and paves the way for human perfection.

Given the fact that mankind is a being with different dimensions and biological aspects, his material and spiritual sides are intertwined and affect one another (13).

The concept of 'human needs' is a global and extensive one. In order to ensure one's survival all these needs should be satisfied. Human's

health can be guaranteed by meeting both physical and spiritual needs. However, in this modern materialistic world, spiritual needs are often neglected. In liberalism, the soul is rejected and in the materialistic approach, the soul is considered spoiled.

Physical and spiritual dimensions of human existence complement and affect one another; in fact, if one of these aspects is not fully satisfied, the other would suffer, as well. Therefore, human consciousness of the spiritual realm and the way one responds to its needs can be effective in tackling problems and disappointments.

According to Frankl, spirituality, as one of the foundations of human existence, is so influential that it can affect other motives. Regarding the abovementioned points, we reviewed some profits and also spiritual needs, which ensure that fasting is suitable answer for them.

### ***Satisfying spiritual feelings and religious needs***

Presence of religious feelings in mankind is proved by many philosophers. William James defines the sense of religiosity as a collection of different emotions which are based on religious knowledge. He also describes religion as "The feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine; this connection is achieved by means of heart, intellect, or religious practices" (20).

As Dr. Viktor Frankl remarks, "Deep in the unconscious mind (or inner consciousness) dwells a strong and deep-rooted sense of religion". Based on clinical observations, he states that "Suppression of religious feelings will lead to suppressed mental and psychological illnesses" (21).

As Dr. Alexis Karl remarks: "Religious feeling, similar to the sense of beauty, is a fundamental human feeling, which invites mankind to be unified with God" (22). If such needs are suppressed or not satisfied, they will lead to catastrophic results such as depression, addiction, nihilistic attitudes, and the advent of spiritual emptiness.

### ***Satisfying the need to worship***

Fasting is practical worship as many psychologists of being, and existentialism

philosophers have confirmed religious worship with inevitable impacts on mental health. This is due to the deep unconscious or subconscious need for worship in all humankind (23). As Dr. Alexis Karl remarks, humans need to worship, and this tendency is as natural as the desire to love.

Acts of worship strengthen our soul and give us the power to withstand grief and anxiety (24). Thus, confusion and spiritual crisis of modern man is the result of his negligence towards his spiritual needs. American psychologist Maslow regards denial, distorted sense of self, and frustration as the major players in psychological trauma (13).

### ***Lifestyle changes***

Nothing is harder than overcoming lethargy and all the habits which hinder personality development. Fasting changes one's lifestyle. These changes in daily habits help one overcome laziness, which is a barrier to one's aspirations and achievements. These changes are necessary for transforming people's lives, and will help them acknowledge their abilities.

Although it is very difficult to change human nature, as prayer will make the task much easier. As Dr. Karl says, "Nothing is harder than overcoming laziness and all the habits that hinder the way of personality development" (25).

### ***Giving meaning to life by feeling the joy of spiritual matters and God's presence***

In Shabaniyah beautiful sermon, Prophet Muhammad impressively says, "O people, Ramadan is ahead of us; God has invited you to his festivity" (26). This beautiful and joyful feeling of being invited by God not only lessens the pain of fasting, but also encourages us to join this festivity hosted by the Lord.

Through fasting, one can feel his presence deep inside and step into the realm of spirituality. He can go back to his origins, enjoy God's presence in this festivity, surrender to the glorious greatness of this communion, and welcome the hardships and sufferings of fasting. As Jaspers says: "In dealing with a supreme, intellect rebuilds itself completely, and when facing the transcendent, "I" becomes the pure "self" and the whole universe reveals itself in its entirety" (27).

A thorough understanding of the spiritual pleasures of fasting is not comparable to any

physical pleasure. As prophet said: "There are two sources of pleasure for anyone who fasts; joy of Iftar and meeting the Lord. However, the happiness and joy of a believer is not that of eating, since it is not a virtue that the righteous are praised for, but it is because they managed to do good in God's presence" (28).

Kierkegaard says, "No matter how hard God's commands are, God is love and man forgets his sufferings through love" (29).

As Hafiz says in his poem, "In the cup (of the heart), we have beheld the reflection of the face of the beloved (God), O thou void of knowledge of the joy of the perpetual wine-drinking of ours" (30).

All these beliefs give meaning and purpose to one's life. In modern psychology, Dr. Frankl believes that some mental diseases are rooted in man's inability to find meaning and responsibility in life, unlike Freud, who considered sexual frustration as the source of psychological disorder (31).

### ***Inhibition of mental obsessions***

Today is the era of delusions and mental obsessions. Which is called intellectual and functional neurosis. It is an unreasonable belief may occupy one's mind and guide him toward irrational, uncontrollable deeds (32).

Prophet Muhammad recommended fasting in response to a person who asked about the way to hold back devil's temptations (30).

### ***Understanding the pain of fellow men***

As Islamic narratives indicated, through fasting, the rich can understand the suffering of the poor since they experience hunger and can show their kindness and empathy for the poor (33).

### ***Conclusion***

This article looked at the philosophy of fasting and its impact on human health. All religious orders have a logical purpose. In fact, based on Quran, blind acts of worship are prohibited. Fasting is a religious practice, mentioned in two Quranic verses. Careful study of these verses and Hadiths shows that the philosophy and purpose of human existence is to provide a context for one's health and well-being. A comparative look at these goals and ideas, along with new scientific advances, has revealed the mystery of human existence and has highlighted the importance of prophets'

teachings and their impact on human health.

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