

PHILOSOPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF FASTING

JAVID AHMAD MALLAH

ICSSR Ph-D Research Fellow
Department of Philosophy
Savitribai Phule Pune University-07
(MS) INDIA

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to explore the philosophical significance of fasting. It also highlights the notion of fasting in Islam and other religions. In this paper an attempt has been made to prove how an individual exercises his freedom while having fast. The paper also tries to examine health and moral benefits of fasting. The paper shall try to describe period of fasting as a period of meditation, self-control, repentance, prayer and spiritual recuperation. The paper also acknowledges the significance of faith, and choice and emphasizes human freedom in practice of observing fasts.

Key notes: God consciousness, freedom, self-control, empathy, love, harmony.

Introduction-

In the 'world today' religion plays a great role among peoples belonging to different beliefs. These Religions should be understood in proper perspective with love and respect. Islamic practices have been misunderstood in various parts of world. Similarly fasting in the month of Ramadan has been misunderstood as 'injustice' and 'unfree act'. These misunderstandings can be removed if this practice of fasting is approached from a philosophical perspective. Hence, an attempt is being made in this paper to comprehend the philosophical aspects of fasting. Before proceeding to understand philosophical significance of the fasting we should well versed with some basic questions like:

What is fasting?

Fasting is characterized as a unique spiritual and moral act. Fasting literally means complete abstention of food and drink from dawn till sunset. Fasting is an obligation for Muslim adults except "those who are suffering from an illness, those who are travelling, pregnant ladies and breastfeeding and those ladies who are going through menstrual bleeding."¹ Fasting is not about avoiding food or drink rather it is a practice of self-discipline and self-control. Fasting

¹ El Bahy El Kholi, Fasting(Al-Siyam) Page no 18,1988.

is a time of spiritual reflection. The purpose of fasting is to clean and free the soul from harmful impurities. It inculcates feeling of empathy and love for poor, hungry and less fortunate, and encourages actions of charity and generosity.

Why do we fast?

Fasting in Ramadan is obligatory for Muslims, it states in Qur'an, "O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, that you may guard yourself against evil and you may attain God-consciousness (Taqwa)." ² In the month of Ramadan, Muslims do not eat and drink during daylight hours. This is because fasting is one of the five pillars of Islam. It is the obligation upon each Muslim (male and female) who has reached the of puberty, and is sane and capable of observing fast. Fasting can create intimate relationship of an individual with his Lord. Fasting inculcates in an individual a sense of understanding of those who are less privileged and increases ones generosity towards them. Fasting is extremely relevant to modern world because it helps an individual in restoring his wisdom and leads him in ethically disciplined life.

Benefits of fasting?

Fasting has tremendous benefits and it has been proved very effective especially in health communities. Fasting is the way of pleasing Allah. It enables an individual to overcome lusts and impure desires. It trains peoples to be patient and calm. It prepares an individual for charity and generosity. It trains people to give for the sake of others and to be compassionate towards the poor.

Fasting is a very safe way to reduce weight. Researchers have shown that fasting allows the body to burn through fat cells more effectively than just regular dieting. Fasting improves insulin sensitivity. Fasting improves hunger it can energize metabolism to burn through calories more efficiently. Fasting can help in digestion and in burning fats. Intermittent fast can improve metabolic function. Studies have shown that fasting keeps digestive system strong. Intermittent fasting improves the immune system because it reduces radical damage, regulates inflammatory conditions in the body and starves off cancer cell formation. During Fast, digestive system becomes strong by avoiding onslaught of food stuffs.

Fasting in other religions?

² The Qur'an, Al-Baqarah:183

As stated in Quran “O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may guard (against evil)”³ . In this Ayat Allah had said fasting is not only for us but it was also the practice of the people before us. Fasting gives inner strength and confidence. It makes one feel that one is the spirit and is not limited to the body alone. Jews fast for about 25 hours on Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement, to ask for God’s forgiveness. Orthodox Christians can spend up to half a year in various forms of fasting, which they believe brings them closer to God. Hindus also observe fast on ‘Pradosham’ and ‘Ekadash’i days, and believed that it will remove bad karmas and sins from the soul. Buddhists also practice fast during times of intensive meditation.

Fasting in Islam is obviously a glorious free act. It is a unique way to please Allah the Almighty. Besides worship fasting provides an unruffled platform to man in order to attain self-restraint, self-discipline and self-purification. Fasting is simply defined as abstention from food, drink and sexual intercourse and everything that nullifies the fast. During this period we eat not a grain of food not drink a drop of water from dawn to dusk, even how delicious the food is or how hungry or thirsty we feel. Along with obligatory prayers fasting is one of the greatest obligations of Muslims. A period of fasting is a period of meditation, self –control, repentance, prayer and spiritual recuperation. In this period a believer starts readjustments of inner life, inspires and refreshes the vigor and vitality of the spiritual forces which are potentially exist but not presently evident or realized.

In Islam, Fasting in month of Ramadan is an obligatory practice. It is a practice that promotes chastity and humility and prevents a believer from sinful, immoral and vice activities and from outburst of uncontrolled lusts and desires. Fasting is not only avoiding or abstaining from food and drink but it also includes abstention of falsehood in speech and practice, from absurd and indecent speech from bad argumentation and impure imagination. By doing so it includes the ethical teachings of Indian philosophical schools. It also includes methods, vows and paths of self-realization and liberation (moksha) of great Philosophers, Acharyas, and Spiritual Leaders of Indian as well as western philosophy. The most important thing it entails is faith and freedom of believer. According to St. Augustine, “Fasting cleanses the soul, raises the mind, subjects one’s flesh to the spirit, renders the heart contrite and humble, scatters the clouds of concupiscence, quenches the fire of lust, and kindles the true light of chastity. Enter again into yourself”⁴.

Fasting is not an unfree act; it is completely a free act. Fasting as I have already mentioned as abstention from food drink and sexual intercourse etc. from dawn to dusk. Quran states that, “eat and drink until the white thread of dawn becomes distinct from the black then resume the fast until nightfall”⁵. Now the question arises what is it that makes us voluntarily and freely to

³ The Qur’an, Al-Baqarah:Al-Baqarah:183

⁴ Augustine St., “On Prayer and Fasting”.

⁵ The Qur’an, Al-Baqarah:184



undergo such rigors? It is a freely chosen commitment, a free act of a believer and his faith in Allah and the Day of Judgment. The very nature of faith is an extremely personal choice. Each and every moment we suppress our passions and desires and negate the delicious foods and juicy fruits. By doing so I realize that only we (sane humans) being conscious and free can do it. It is job of ours and ours alone. Because we have unique quality of accepting and rejecting things of pleasure and pain, good or bad, even rules and regulations, orders and commandments, laws and relations and so on . The power of accepting and negating are unique in human beings and they are clues of human freedom. Choosing a negation of anything or negating a course of action or accepting anything or any course of action in both the situations a chooser exercises his freedom. Hence both accepting and negating are the clues which reveal our nature as free. Negating food and drink during day and acceptance of thirst and hunger is my free act. Hence fasting is a believer's free will. He/she did not choose it under any compulsion or force but they choose it because of their faith which fulfills their higher cravings of here and here- after (heaven). it enhances believers love for Allah and Allah's love for them it is a unique way to bring ourselves near to Allah and His mercy and blessings. Allah wishes to benefits those who observe fasts by great rewards. Thus who observe fast for Him and please Him in return He will please them with great rewards. It is stated in Quran, "God desires ease for you, not hardship. He desires you to fast the whole month, so that you may glorify Him for His having guided you and so that you may be grateful to Him"⁶

I believe that the act of negating delicious dishes and grains, juice and fruits, salty and sweets even in intense thirst and hunger, involves my freedom. I refuse to take even in loneliness when I was alone when food and fruits were available to me and nobody was watching me. I choose to continue my fast not because of any force or pressure, but because of my faith, my true subservience which enhances my pleasure and fulfills my inclinations and cravings to reach the end. This freedom of choice and consciousness of duty and spirit of patience that incessant fasting for a whole month inculcates in me and helps me in strengthen my faith. Faith is more than intellectual understanding and higher than reason. "Those who neither posses faith nor do good deeds. They spread disorder in the world and perpetrate all kinds of violence and oppression they are worst of the people"⁷

Fasting kindles and inspires the religious life of an individual and it increases God consciousness (taqwa) which are the basic endowments of it. I believe and it is strongly supported by my faith that fasting opens the heart of an individual for the love of Allah and brings him near to mercy and blessings of Allah. The Messenger of Allah (SAW) said, "whoever fasts during Ramadan out of sincere faith and hoping to attain Allah's rewards, and

⁶ The Qur'an, Al-Baqarah:185

⁷ Maududi Sayyid Abdul A'la, Towards Understanding Islam, page 35, Markazi Maktaba Islami publishers New Delhi, 2007.

then all his past sins will be forgiven."⁸. Faith opens way to knowledge of a person. Without faith the reality and the mystery of the person remains closed in its most profound and real sense. Faith is a personal relation between God and man and complete self-surrender to His will. Faith is chosen by a free being, it is not given to him by force. If any person is forced to believe or to act any course of action without his wish and choice is absurd and meaningless. The decisions and actions chosen by an individual under force or compulsion will lost its value and significance.

The conquest fast keeps me always free in different ways, on the one hand after pre –fast meal (suhur) my freedom of fast reveals immediately after fast. I confront thirst and hunger in the availability of food and water but I choose to continue my fast. The denial of food in its availability is the possibility of my freedom while fasting because the refusal to take it is my choice. And I am free to make choices. On the other hand, after the fast my course of actions my decisions will be mine and mine alone. My thinking, my desiring, and so on would be mine after the fast more clearly and strongly than before the fast. Freedom in fasting has two aspects negative and positive. According to former, it is denial of desire of drinking, eating, sexual intercourse etc. Its positive aspect is beyond our appetites and desires it is spiritual practice that brings us into deeper awareness of our relationship to God. Its positive aspect is completely based on faith.

My faith is my choice; my fasting is my duty, choosing this course of action is my freedom. I am responsible of my decisions and choices because I am a free being and this freedom is bestowed to me by Allah the Almighty.

From moral point of view, fasting has immense impact on human beings and on the society in which he lives. The virtue of fasting is that it helps an individual in relating to the plight of the poor and the hungry and makes one aware of the difficulties faced by several those fellow members of the society who are deprived of one of the basic necessities of life like food. This creates empathy in the individual's mind and heart and gives rise to the tendency of giving to those who are deprived, resulting in charity.

I request to all irrespective of their status must fast during the month of Ramadan. This emphasizes the essential quality of men and thus goes a long way towards creating in them sentiments of love, sympathy, harmony, peace and brotherhood. During Ramadan evil conceals itself while good comes to the fore and the whole atmosphere is filled with piety and purity. Fasting exalts love; by love you will reach the very heart of humanity and religion. And by love you will win the hearts of people.

⁸ (Imam Bukhari)

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