

Good News

And give good news to those who do good (to others) – Holy Quran 22:37

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The Physical and Moral Health Benefits of *Fasting* and *Healthy Diets*

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The current viral pandemic has affected every aspect of human life. Like never before in the history of mankind has there been such a collective focus on ‘outer and inner’ cleansing. As a result there have been much discussions taking place, globally, about re-examining and improving our lifestyles with emphasis on very basic hygiene, healthy dietary habits, exercise, prayer and meditation, and the value we attach to personal relations within and without the home. At least, for now, international relations, too, exhibit a rare preponderance on the side of empathy and care instead of the usual fear-mongering suspicions and hatred.

Above all, the realization of humanity’s dependence on a Higher Power is now on everyone’s lips from frontline medics to hardened, back-room, politicians. Proud and unwavering cynics,

whose *human* gods have failed them miserably, also find themselves in utter despondence with nowhere to turn for solace; except to a much Higher Power, the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth.

Fasting Prescribed by the Great Physician of the Universe

Providence has been working in the interests of humankind’s well-being since the beginning of time. The Holy Quran talks about fasting as a means of protection against what is harmful for us, physically and morally. In religious parlance this is termed ‘evil’. In fact fasting was instituted long before the advent of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Thus we come across fasting mentioned in revelations that came before the Holy Quran was revealed.

Fasting prescribed to ‘guard against evil’

With the appearance of the new moon, the Muslim month of fasting, known as Ramadan, commenced. It is obligatory for all fit and healthy pubescent Muslims to fast. This means staying away

from all foods, drinks, sexual intercourse with one's spouse and all immoral utterances and behaviours from dawn to dusk for one full lunar cycle. This is in fulfilment of the Quranic injunction:

‘O you, who believe, fasting, is *prescribed for you*, as it was *prescribed for those before you*, so that you may *guard against evil*.’
– 2:183

It is interesting to note that the Holy Quran uses an expression often used in doctor/patient relations when it says ‘fasting is *prescribed for you*.’

Fasting is indeed an elixir designed by the Providential Healer to strengthen the immune system of *body* and *soul*. This is testified to by both medical and faith experts from various backgrounds these days.

The broad-based efficacy of fasting is therefore very well captured in the statement, ‘**so that you may guard against evil.**’

On a physical level ‘evil’ would include harmful pathogens, i.e. all kinds of toxins such as the coronaviruses that constantly invade the body and cause diseases. These viral attacks trigger the body's defence mechanism or immune system known as the white blood cells into action. If the immune system i.e. the white

blood cells are worn out and weak, the body naturally goes into panic mode when invaded by a virus and start to release a chemical to support the white blood cells in the fight against harmful viruses. However, because of the indiscriminate overreaction by the chemical released, instead of helping the white blood cells, it tends to cause harm and damage to the body's healthy cells in the process. This results in the person starting to feel sick. So it is important for the body's immune system to be strong so as not to become reliant on a chemical in the body that wants to help but causes harm instead.

Fasting Strengthens the Body's Immune System

Medical science, however, has proven that fasting regenerates white blood cells thereby strengthening the immune system. For example it is highly recommended in the treatment of cancer patients affected by the debilitating effects of chemotherapy.

Studies done at the University of Southern California, Leonard Davis School of Gerontology, in 2014, found that fasting revitalizes the immune system. Reporting their findings in the journal *Cell Stem Cell*, their research scientists observed that ‘when cells went without standard fuel from regular meals, the body switched to survival mode and ended up

killing off old, damaged white blood cells to conserve energy. While that may not sound groundbreaking, what happened afterwards is noteworthy: **Once provided with food and nutrients again, the body's stem cells kicked into gear and restocked the immune system with a fresh batch of (healthier) cells.'**

The Buchinger Wihelmi Clinics in Southern Germany and Spain are longstanding institutions dedicated to therapeutic *fasting*. The head Dr. Françoise Wilhelmi Toledo, in response to a question whether fasting is good in terms of coronavirus, says: 'In our 100 years of clinical experience we have seen and discovered so many positive effects (of fasting) on immunity. Fasting is *enhancing* immunity...' Might not be the ultimate cure but a definite 'guard against the harmful effects' of the virus.

Therefore in the current viral pandemic, the Muslim month of fasting, is most welcome and could not have come at a better time.

Ramadan emphasizes the importance of maintaining healthy diets

Fasting in the month of Ramadan also helps us to refocus our attention on the importance of *healthy* eating, overall. It is at times like these when even the usual *lawful* and *wholesome* food are prohibited during the hours of fasting that the value of

the Providential Wisdom that prohibits the consumption of toxic items such as intoxicants; blood, and pork¹ is much appreciated.

Medical science concur that the flesh of the swine is *unclean* as stated in the revealed words of the Creator of humankind. Whilst it is common knowledge that the pig is by nature a scavenger known to even feed on its own faeces, higher studies show that it has a very poor excretory system, so that most of what it eats ends up in its fat. Thus there are many in the medical fraternity that are now convinced that of the major diseases we come across in the world, many are directly related to *excessive* consumption of pork.

Muslims, Jews and some Christian denominations adhere strictly to these divinely instituted dietary prohibitions. On the other hand, to the peril of the rest of humankind, there are others that do not! Therefore in the light of the current global pandemic, it often baffles me how man, out of sheer greed, blindly driven by a 'couldn't care less' obstinacy, violates the laws of God and still expect that there would be no harmful consequences?

It is said that 'pork', despite its description in both Islamic and Jewish

¹ Flesh of swine is '**unclean**' – Leviticus 11:7 and Holy Quran 5:3; 2:173; 6:145; 16:115

Scriptures as ‘**unclean**’, ranks among *the most consumed* meat product in Britain, Europe, North and South America and Asia, especially China. Thus, because it is a highly lucrative industry, its health risks are often deliberately downplayed even by the World Health Organization (W.H.O.). The reason for this is most likely latter’s dependence on the financial support of these nations. Their lack of independent objectivity and necessary ‘legal’ clout to put an end to those practices that hold serious health risks to the people they are supposed to serve and protect, have recently come under heavy criticism. This weakness in their system has resulted in the situation where all the so called master minds of the world are now running around in circles unable to pinpoint the major root cause of these recurrent viral outbreaks whereas much of it might just be staring them in the face.

The Moral Condition

There is also much debate about whether what we eat also has a bearing on our moral condition. We already know too well what intoxicants do to the moral and mental state of a person. Although there’s not much substantive scientific proof of the effect of certain foodstuffs on our moral condition, some studies do indicate it indeed has a bearing on our mental state. However, it was the Frenchman Anthelme

Brillat-Savarin who wrote in 1826, ‘Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are.’ Although he might not have meant this in a literal sense, nature supports what he says. Thus we find herbivorous animals such as sheep, goats, cows, and camels are fairly docile compared to the aggressive nature of the carnivores (meat eating animals) such as lions and tigers. The same principle manifests itself in humans. Vegetarians, for example, tend to be more passive than their ‘meat’ loving counterparts.

This now begs the question, does the ‘flesh of swine’; strictly forbidden by the Great Master of the Universe, have a negative impact on man’s moral condition? Naturally, the ‘fat cat’ corporations that rake in trillions of dollars annually from the sale of this product will argue, like they do with their other low quality mass produced, genetically modified food products, that there is not sufficient scientific proof of this. However, if the current *apparent* socially accepted low moral standards and values we come across in Western societies are anything to go by, then one has to admit there is indeed, enough *food* for thought that supports such a contention!

Thus the ‘evil’ the Holy Quran refers to also comes in the form of man’s uncontrolled bestial passions and desires that lead to *immoral* tendencies and

behaviours. We are all too familiar with the damage these uncontrolled bestial tendencies are causing in the world. This has been the situation since time immemorial, and it would be redundant for me to repeat it in detail here; suffice to say what the Holy Quran draws attention to in the following verse:

‘Corruption has appeared in the land and the sea on account of that which men’s hands have wrought.’
– 30:41

If you consider the corruption that have manifested in the world in just about all spheres of life, including the environment, then this verse says it all.

Fasting is a most effective means of restoring *moral* health by teaching man how to control unbridled passions such as lust, greed and anger for example. It teaches us that, as much as we stay away from what is otherwise lawful and wholesome during the fast, how much more important it is to stay away from what is *unlawful* and *immoral*.

The Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him) is reported to have said:

‘Fasting is *a shield*, so let the one who fasts not indulge in any foul speech *or do any evil deed*, and if anyone fights or quarrels with him or abuses him, he should say, I am fasting. By Him Who holds my

soul in His hand, the breath of the faster is more pleasant with Allah than the scent of musk.’ (Bukhari hadith 1904, see also hadith 1894)

It is clear from this advice that it is not refraining from food that makes the breath of the faster so sweet; it is refraining from foul speech and abuse and evil words and deeds of all kinds, so much so that the one who fasts does not utter an offensive word even by way of retaliation. Thus a fasting person undergoes not only a physical discipline by curbing his bodily desires, the craving for food and drink, and the sex appetite, but he is actually required to undergo a direct moral discipline by avoiding *all kinds of evil words and evil deeds*. In the sight of God, the fast loses its value not only by taking food or drink but also by telling a lie, using foul language, acting unfaithfully, or resorting to any kind of immoral behaviour.

The Prophet Isaiah on the True Spirit of Fasting

The Holy Quran in the verse quoted above states that fasting was prescribed to those (prophets) before Muhammad as well. Thus we find that God revealed to the Israelite prophet Isaiah who appeared after Moses and before Jesus to tell his followers, the Jews, what God expected from them when they *fast*. Here is an abridged extract from Isaiah 58:

‘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.’

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

Compulsory charity during Ramadan

The Muslims’ fast in Ramadan is incomplete without the compulsory charity called *fitra*. It is compulsory on every Muslim, young and old; except the indigent. The *fitra* charity is to enable the poorest of the poor to also celebrate the Eid, i.e. the day of celebration that comes at the end of their fasts with a sumptuous meal and the joy that the occasion brings.

Besides the *fitra* which is a charity to be made exclusively in the month of

Ramadan for destitute Muslims, the Muslims are encouraged to make their annual compulsory charity known as *zakaat*, meant for the well-being of all mankind, especially the needy and indigent, regardless of race or religion, during the month of Ramadan, to get the maximum spiritual satisfaction that comes with the holy month of fasting.

The pangs of hunger that the fasting one undergoes evokes compassion for the poor, the homeless and all those less fortunate that often goes without a morsel to eat for days. That this happens in a world where there is so much food available; where institutions would rather dump the oversupply of vegetables and fruit that has come about as a result of the slowdown caused by the pandemic, instead of sharing it with the poor, is shameful to say the least. This, again, confirms that man has no one to blame but himself for the sorry state he is in. For too long the *bestial* nature of man has been dominant; if he fails to control himself who knows what other catastrophe awaits him. To control the *beast* within is the ultimate aim of the Divine institution of fasting.

The month of fasting is also the month of *intense prayers*. Thus in the verse that mentions the fast, God confirms:

‘And when My servants ask thee concerning Me, surely I am near. I answer the prayer of the suppliant

when he calls on me, so they should hear My call and believe in Me that they may walk in the right way.’ – 2:186

O Merciful, Loving and Forgiving Lord of the Universe please forgive and have mercy on Thy creation. Please remove this *bitter cup* from us, not as we please but as Thou please. Amen!



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