

The Inner Dimensions of Fasting

By Imam al-Ghazali (may Allah(swt) be pleased with him)

Three Grades

It should be known that there are three grades of fasting: ordinary, special and extra-special.

Ordinary fasting means abstaining from food, drink and sexual satisfaction.

Special Fasting means keeping one's ears, eyes, tongue, hands and feet -- and all other organs -- free from sin.

Extra-special Fasting means fasting of the heart from unworthy concerns and worldly thoughts, in total disregard of everything but Allah, (swt). This kind of Fast is broken by thinking of worldly matters, except for those conducive to religious ends, since these constitute provision for the Hereafter and are not of this lower world.

Inward Requirements

As for Special Fasting, this is the kind practiced by the righteous. It means keeping all one's organs free from sin and six things are required for its accomplishment.

1. See Not What Displeases Allah

A chaste regard, restrained from viewing anything that is blameworthy or reprehensible, or that distracts the heart and diverts it from the remembrance of Allah, (swt). Said the Prophet, on him be peace: 'The furtive glance is one of the poisoned arrows of Satan, on him be Allah's curse. Whoever forsakes it for fear of Allah will receive from Him, (swt), a faith the sweetness of which he will find within his heart.'

Jabir relates from Anas that Allah's Messenger, on him be peace, said: 'Five things break a man's Fast: lying, backbiting, gossiping, perjury and a lustful gaze.'

2. Speak Not...

Guarding one's tongue from idle chatter, lying, gossiping, obscenity, rudeness, arguing and controversy; making it observe silence and occupying it with remembrance of Allah, (swt), and with recitation of Quran. This is the fasting of the tongue. Said Sufyan: 'Backbiting annuls the Fast.' Layth quotes Mujahid as saying: 'Two habits annul Fasting: backbiting and telling lies.'

The Prophet, on him be peace, said: 'Fasting is a shield; so when one of you is Fasting he should not use foul or foolish talk. If someone attacks him or insults him, let him say: "I am Fasting, I am Fasting!"'

3. Hear Not...

Closing one's ears to everything reprehensible; for everything unlawful to utter is likewise unlawful to listen to. That is why Allah, (swt), equated the eavesdropper with the profiteer, in His words, Exalted is He: 'Listeners to falsehood, consumers of illicit gain.' [al- Ma'idah, 5:42]

Allah, (swt), also said: 'Why do their rabbis and priests not forbid them to utter sin and consume unlawful profit?' [al-Ma'idah, 5:63]

Silence in the face of backbiting is therefore unlawful. Allah, (swt), said: 'You are then just like them.' [al-Nisa, 4:140] That is why the Prophet, on him be peace, said: 'The backbiter and his listener are copartners in sin.'

4. Do Not...

Keeping all other limbs and organs away from sin: the hands and feet from reprehensible deeds, and the stomach from questionable food at the time for breaking Fast. It is meaningless to Fast -- to abstain from lawful food - only to break one's Fast on what is unlawful. Said the Prophet, on him be peace: 'How many of those who Fast get nothing from it but hunger and thirst!' This has been taken to mean those who break their Fast on unlawful food. Some say it refers to those who abstain from lawful food, but break their Fast on human flesh through backbiting, which is unlawful. Others consider it an allusion to those who do not guard their organs from sin.

5. Avoid Overeating

Not to over-indulge in lawful food at the time of breaking Fast, to the point of stuffing one's belly. There is no receptacle more odious to Allah, (swt), than a belly stuffed full with lawful food. Of what use is the Fast as a means of conquering Allah's enemy and abating appetite, if at the time of breaking it one not only makes up for all one has missed during the daytime, but perhaps also indulges in a variety of extra foods?

6. Look To Allah With Fear And Hope

After the Fast has been broken, the heart should swing like a pendulum between fear and hope. For one does not know if one's Fast will be accepted, so that one will find favour with Allah, or whether it will be rejected, leaving one among those He abhors. This is how one should be at the end of any act of worship one performs.