



Consumption of Food and Wealth: A Balanced Approach

Opening duas. Allah says in the Holy Qur'an:

Today all good things are made lawful for you. The food of those who were given the Book is lawful for you, and your food is lawful for them. And lawful marriage with chaste women from among the believers, and chaste women from among those who were given the Book before you. Give them a dowry and take them in honest wedlock, not the fornication of lovers. Whoever covers up the truth faith, his work is in vain, and in the final life he will come to be among the losers.

Also in Surah Ta Ha, 'āyat 81:

Eat of the good things which We have provided for you and do not exceed the limits We have set, lest My wrath come upon you. For those upon whom My wrath falls have thrown themselves into utter ruin.

These two 'āyāt, from among many 'āyāt in Qur'an about eating good things, extend to much more than eating (although some of us focus a lot on eating). They tell us about a person who believes and trusts in God, and has certain guidelines through which they should live their lives. These are both specific statements and examples. These guidelines are personal, social, individual and collective. Note that in the second reading, Allah refers to us as *khalifas*, the ones who are deputized to represent the teachings of Islam. When we say Islam, we realize also that He is referring to the Book. He is talking about the Ahl al-Kitab, the people of Torah, the people of Injil, the people of Islam – not just

“Muslims,” but all those who have been given the same guidelines – Christians, Muslims, Jews.

He doesn't just say, “O you people.” He says, “O you messengers,” and assigns us each a role as a messenger of a teaching. We live our lives, each one of us, by the way we make our decisions and by the way we carry a message. Think about in your daily life how many messages you transmit without ever opening up your mouth and without speaking words. You can imagine then what ‘transmit’ means by carrying a message in the way one lives their life as an example. There is a level of understanding what these very simple and seemingly insignificant ‘*āyāt*’ mean. “Oh, this is just about food. Let's skip over this and talk about hell and heaven. Everybody loves to talk about hell and heaven.” Except us – we like to talk about how you apply your belief in your day to day life, no matter who you are or where you come from.

These are not insignificant, however. Not only do they deal with food, but they deal with the whole concept of consumption. Each one of us is a consumer. We consume products. We are wearing clothes. Very few of us are wearing clothes made in the USA, or made by us here. Certainly we have not been spinning thread and sewing clothes that I can remember. We do not raise the sheep to get the thread. We are far removed from the process except when we go to the store looking for the great sales. We are all consumers. We all eat food. We try to eat as much food as we can grow here, but even that we are not able to fully do. We pay for the things we don't have here, usually with money; and money is a means for transferring and allocating wealth. You give some, and you get some – the person who makes the shoes, the blouses, the rugs, the socks and the people who have the wealth. Food consumption is the same thing.

Consumption is a very important part of wealth. Wealth from an Islamic point of view is produced only to be consumed. Money is to be kept in motion. Not to be squandered or

held on to for too long. Money is consumed by transferring its value from one thing to another; hence the whole meaning of *zakat*. *Zakat* enables everyone to be able to contribute to the greater cause. *Zakat* comes from *tazkiya*, meaning to purify. It's a form of purifying the culture, and keeping everyone as equitable as possible. Wealth that is produced today is consumed tomorrow, and so on. Consumption plays a very significant part in the life of the individual, as well as in the life of our community and our nation. We know what is happening in the world today with the terrible debt crisis. We know that much of it comes from greed, and the greater distance between the haves and the have-nots. People are being exploited. Resources are being exploited, and we know how much they are being exploited globally for political reasons, not for humane reasons, with the sense of renewability.

It's necessary to be very careful how we consume our wealth. There may be an abundance of wealth in one country, and a lack in another. If it's an equitable system, a just system of exchange and distribution, everyone will benefit. But if it is not spent wisely, if it is waste or there is an unbalanced way of distributing their wealth; if people only spend their wealth on unnecessary, luxurious things, then it becomes more and more imbalanced. The purpose of wealth is to supply the needs of everyone, just as Allah (swt) has given a bounty everywhere for people. It is essential that the flow of consumption and our ability to consume (but not just for ourselves) has to be guided in some way, in some right direction. If we grow a plant that we can eat, that's wonderful. But invariably we grow more than we can eat, like all the peppers we have this year. Obviously, we have grown more than we can eat, process, or are willing to, so Islam tells us that we have a duty to help others, to share that wealth, and they have a duty to share theirs.

The Holy Qur'an is very enlightening with regard to this, but on the other hand, who reads it for that purpose? The same question always arises. You travel through the Islamic world, you find little Islam; you travel through the Muslim world, you find few

Muslims. You can say it about any religion, basically. That's the shame of the day we live in today. [The Qur'an] encourages us to use good and useful things, and discourages us from waste and unnecessary expenditures. It enjoins us to eat what is good and pure for health reasons. **"Today good and pure things are made lawful for you." "We have provided you with good and pure things." "Eat of good and pure things." "We have given to you what is lawful."** These are the words of Allah (swt). 'Good things' means anything people would find pleasing, sweet, and good for your body and your health, agreeable to the sight, to the smell and taste. We know that is distributed in strange way. You could go to Indonesia and eat durian... whoo! How many people like that? But an Indonesian loves it. Most people think it smells terrible. Tastes are acquired to the people. Allah has made it so everyone has something to find pleasureable, to look at, to smell and to taste.

The Qur'an has laid down some very general principles that govern wealth and consumption, and Muslims are clearly advised to spend their wealth on things for indirect consumption which they find pleasing to them. One doesn't need to wear a hair shirt, be an ascetic, or not enjoy the wondrous bounty Allah (swt) has provided us, the *rizq*, the *fadl*, the bounty. We all deserve to enjoy them, and we are enjoined to enjoy them. But we are also told we have to share them. There are no strict rules as to what is pleasing and what is agreeable. There is no rule that tells everybody, this smells nice and that doesn't smell nice; this is tasty and that is not. I'm sure people would agree there are certain things that don't taste good, so it is left for the individual in every society to determine that.

The point is people are given a great deal of choice, especially in things of consumption. No one is told it is only good to wear wool, and bad to wear cotton. Or you have to wear a hat always. Oh, I'm sorry; there are places that tell you that, aren't there? Yes, of

course! That's too bad, isn't it? Because they tell you that in the name of religion, and it's just not true. It's not true in Afghanistan, or Iran; it's not true in all these other places. These are constructions of human beings. We are told to be modest, not to wear a tent. There should be a lot of freedom of choice, especially in things we consume physically. But the real requirement is what? It is to be moderate and think of others. To eat what is pleasing, agreeable, healthy and pure is an example of the middle path. Now, we can make suggestions to each other and say that a really good vegan diet reduces heart disease, or a nice vegetarian diet. Some doctor in Cleveland says, don't eat anything with a face or a mother, and it will reverse your heart disease. He's Christian, not a Muslim. We don't have to hide out in caves or deprive ourselves of something to be holy. We don't have to be poor to be holy.

There is no denial of the pleasures of life in order to be holy. In fact, in Islam it is considered that a person is ungrateful if they abstain from the things of this world that Allah has provided for us. It's arrogant and selfish if you over indulge in those things. The most successful way of life, according to the Qur'an, is to be balanced and moderate. Islam allows a great deal of freedom to people in the matter of consumption. We are free to spend on things that are good, that satisfy us, that provide for us, as long as they don't indulge in what is impure, or cause loss and suffering to others. This means the freedom to spend is limited to good and pure things, but it doesn't give us the right to waste. If we happen to have wealth, it doesn't give us the right to be greedy. There are guidelines that not only protect us, but that protect the whole society, the *ummah*. They allow society to be not endangered by creating classes of people who have and classes who have not.

Allah says in Qur'an: "**[The Prophet] makes lawful good things and prohibits from them impure things.**" That means all things one finds impure, all things that are displeasing and bad. The warning is given in a much more forceful way when Allah says: "**O man! Eat the lawful and good things that are in the earth, and follow not**

the footsteps of the devil. Surely he is an open enemy.” This reference is to tendencies in society to be corrupt, to be over-indulgent with too many luxuries. The devil is supposed to have broken the code of proper action by Allah (swt). We are encouraged not to commit these excesses and thereby open the doorway to Shaytan.

The second thing I want to talk about briefly in terms of day to day life and responsibility is the Golden Mean. The Holy Qur'an has adopted the Golden Mean between two extremes of life: between abject materialism, and total asceticism and the removal of oneself from the world. On the one hand, it forbids excessive expenditures for the gratification of desire; and on the other, it condemns abstaining from enjoying good and pure things. **“O you who believe! Forbid not the good things which Allah has made lawful for you, and exceed not their limits.”** This verse really denounces some of the self-denying practices that all of us – Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, whoever – practice. Even among the Muslims there are people who have an ascetic mentality, even if there are not monasteries people go to.

It also denounces any torpor, slothfulness, laziness, habits of abstaining from the pleasures of life. How can we deny what Allah (swt) has given us? How can we overlook those who are around us? There has to be a balanced approach to the problems of consumption. We sit almost continuously on some crossroad, personally and collectively, in terms of making decisions about life, expenditures in the home, expenditures in the community, and the concerns for the nation. Thank Allah, we have never had to go without food here, never not had a roof over our heads, or had to worry about the clothes we place on our backs. But does it mean that the lesson of the Qur'an is not for us, or that we should visualize the poverty in the world in order to get some lesson out of it? Of course, we have a responsibility for all the people in the world: for the people in Somalia, in Darfur, in China, for all the people in the inner cities of this country.

Every one of us in our own way sits with some degree of greed, some degree of something uncontrolled and not properly directed, not properly balanced. There are those of us who feel that anything is too much, and that we may feel victim in wanting. But the truth is there are examples in the Hadith. The Prophet (sal) decided to abstain from certain things, and Allah spoke to him, **“Why do you forbid yourself that which Allah has made lawful to you?”** We can’t just assume we are doing something very holy. There has to be some filtering, some mediating force. There has to be some way of filtering or answering the question, “What is right? What is wrong? What is good? What is bad? Why do this? Why not do that?” It is little different than trying to decide what tastes good, what doesn’t taste good, what smells good, and what doesn’t smell good – acquired tastes. We have to acquire a taste for balance, also.

These things are mediated in some way by social convention and by spiritual guidelines, and by the middle path in terms of consumption and understanding. You have to have some kind of moral filter, social filter, ethical filter, a clear understanding of who we are, why we are, where we are, and what we are doing. So even the Prophet (sal), when he decided to abstain was told by Allah, “Don’t do that. I made things lawful for you. Who are you to abstain from what I have given you?” We know his intention was good. He was trying to refine himself and make himself better with those decisions. On the other hand, had he indulged himself in those things (which he never did), Allah could have said to him, “Why do you indulge yourselves in these things, when there are those who have nothing? We gave you these things to use for a reason.” Indeed, we have been given knowledge and reason.

The Qur’an has shown a very balanced approach to what one can consume, and prescribes moderation, [such as] in wealth. Is it just money? No, wealth is many things. Wealth is our family, our property, our ideas, our knowledge. We don’t abstain from

those forms of wealth, we use them every day. We have to find *mizan*/ balance and dedicate ourselves to that consciousness. We have to look at our life and see other people's lives also. We have to understand that equity is not always measured in exactly the same way. Not everyone in the world wants exactly the same thing. But everyone in the world in a sense wants the same thing: peace, security, food on the table, a roof over the head.

Most people in the world are not greedy. But you create a society like the one we live in, and greed is very, very easy; extremely easy. Even the poorest person in this country is fed this idea of the great miracle of this country: you can be successful and become wealthy. Success equals wealth. It almost puts greed up there as a goal. But it's the values that are the most important: of compassion, mercy, love, tolerance, peace, and understanding, and gratitude for what you do have. What is also important is the opportunity to be educated and seize the opportunity of that education, to better yourself. But for what reason? It is to better yourself for yourself, your family, the rest of your community, and society.

Even in the name of service, sometimes we make bad decisions. But property doesn't mean property only; knowledge doesn't mean money, and success doesn't just mean power. It's extremely important that we remember the Qur'an shows us the best way of spending our wealth, and teaches us that wealth is not a thing to be despised or worshiped. It's a means of sustenance or support. It doesn't allude to or join spirituality with poverty, except inner poverty. It means that each one makes our full effort in sufficient ways to submit to God, and trust, and create wealth for the benefit of our society and our community. It is not to hold back and just do for ourselves and ego, and not become wealthy because we are doing a job we like to do, or we do a job that gives us lots of money. But it is to do what's necessary and to trust in Allah (swt). To do what our heart drives us to do from the goodness of our heart and those values, and then trust.

Look at the work we do. Look how we started here, with nothing, no buildings, no money in the bank. And Allah (swt) has taken us all over the world to serve other human beings, and we have never been without a roof over our heads or food on our tables, *alhamdulillah*. The people we serve are faces and names. We don't just serve generally. We know who they are and what they are receiving. And guess what? We are served by them. All property is meant for the community. It should not be wasted. It doesn't mean it is all communal property. It may be owned by individuals. But *ahlan wa sahan* should be over every door.

The best way of spending our wealth is on understanding the transitoriness of life; that wealth is not a thing to be despised or wasted or hoarded or loved too much. It is a means of sustaining, of supporting, and of providing the needs for ourselves and others. When we start with food, as I did today, about eating what is given to us and what is lawful to us, it's not just about food. There are things that can't and can be done and should be done. There are things that shouldn't be done. There are foods that are better to eat and better not to eat. We are enjoined to think over all of that. Whatever is good for you spiritually is good for you in the world. But what appears to be good in the world is not good for you necessarily spiritually. Spending on oneself is an act of worship and virtue. And spending on others is an act of virtue and worship, too.

Worship is not just praying; worship is providing. Prayer is also providing. We should learn that from earliest childhood. Charity we say begins at home, but it doesn't end there. Let's be clear; a Muslim is anyone who is submitted and surrendered to Allah, and Allah (swt) has accepted them. They may call themselves Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist. It's submission to the truth, to the compassion, to the mercy, submission to the love, submission to what is just. That is Islam. Too bad many Muslims don't understand that, but it doesn't mean it is not the truth. Let's remember that from time to time when

we rise in the morning and until the time we go to sleep to be really balanced and good people, *inshā'a-LLāh*, toward everyone. *Aslaamu aleykum*.