

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

Qualities to Benefit from in Ramadan Fasting
Patience and Contentment with the Decree of Allah

In Surah al-Imran, Allah relates:

O you who have come to securely believe, beware of Allah as you should be aware of Allah, and do not die save that you are Muslims. (3:102)

Also in Surah al-Furqān:

Save the one who repents and believes and performs righteous deeds, for such Allah will change their evil deeds to good and Allah is Ever-Forgiving, Singularly Compassionate. And whoever repents and does good deeds, surely, he is one who is turned to Allah in sincere repentance. (25:70-71)

Then Allah goes on and talks about that more in detail. As we approach this time of year, I think it is very important for us to reflect on some of the qualities which will allow us to receive the most from fasting, the most from this month of Sha'bān, and the most from our life as Muslims and people of *tariqah*, Sufis. The Prophet (sal) reportedly said,

I heard Allah the Majestic say, "He who is not content with My decree, and does not believe in My destiny, let him seek a god other than Me. And none of you will believe, unless he believes in the decree, its goodness and its badness, and its sweetness and its bitterness."

Truly in Islam, we are told that life is not to be only sweet and wonderful, with no problems. We hear a lot of excuses about all the things we have done wrong. We are told that everything is learned from its opposite, and there is no absolute balance in creation

except over time. At any moment, in a snapshot of life, when we are in an up moment or down moment, a bitter moment or a sweet moment, we very rarely reflect on how we arrived there, and what the opposite is teaching us. These positives and negatives – like ups and downs, fronts and backs, insides and outsides, good and bad, right and wrong – have degrees. Islam is a very realistic teaching. We are told that every one of those occurrences and circumstances has a meaning. What is sweet and bitter, what is right and wrong, what is good and bad, what is proper and what is improper – each holds a lesson for us (as we and if we strive toward perfecting our knowledge of ourself and of Allah Swt) of what this life means, of what we can have inside ourselves if we really refine ourselves.

Certainly, it is the promise of the Hereafter, when Allah looks at our destiny and sees how we have chosen to live our lives. Choice is very important, but it comes within no choice, as I've said many times. Right now we are coming to the month of Ramadan, and we don't really have a choice. We have to fast, unless there are reasons not to, like illness or traveling. If we can make up the fast, we have no choice, unless we are ill. The choices are within no choice. This is a very important part of Islamic life, and the life of a person of *tariqah*, too. Even a smallest child learns choice very early. There are also guidelines and rules, which are not there to torment us or restrict us, but to give us direction and often to protect us, just like the signs on the highway show us where to go, and the metal railings keep us from going over the edge.

If we crash into the metal, then there is less chance we will go over the edge, but also less chance we will get to where we were going, at least on time. Recently, I gave this example in a different way. When driving on the road and you see the sign that says "Lynchburg," you don't stop your car. It's only pointing the way. If you stop your car, there is no Lynchburg there. It is an *isharat*, to give us direction. These 'āyāt in the Qur'an are not places necessarily of arrival – they can be if we know exactly how to read it – but they are pointing us in a direction for both inner and outer life. The laws and

guidelines are not there to create some sort of restriction, but rather are a pathway for learning and understanding. Every pathway has its guidelines, and every pathway restricts to some degree, just like the road. In a sense, water is restricted when it flows through a pipe. It gets to its destination under pressure, which may be your sink or your glass of water or hose through which you can do different tasks.

If we don't believe that these laws and guidelines were set out on purpose, with a clear intention from Allah Swt for each one of them, then we will think of them to be sweet or bitter depending on our reaction, or the event, or how it turns out, not how we approach the event. We will wait for a response and then say, "Oh, that's sweet," or "that's bitter." If the guidelines prove to us that we have committed some error, then we will consider it bitter, unless we accept that the reason for those guidelines and laws are so that the next time, we won't make that same mistake, or we will learn from that bitterness. We won't consider the bitterness as purposefully bitter, but as something that is good for us, just like eating some bitter medicine is healing for us. If you really consider it, most natural medicine is bitter. Its purpose is to heal. If you don't believe it, go get a remedy from Dr. Chang. Then you'll really believe it. Chinese medicine is exceptionally bitter.

We have to act out of faith sometimes. Faith is very closely associated with trust. The trust we have can be absolute in that we don't lose it or question it. In that sense, we are unshakeable if we know what we believe and we are secure in ourselves. We understand that there are moments of lack of security, but we have a secure foundation. Just like when you take your boat out on the lake and the weather can come up, we can feel very insecure out in the boat. But when you get to the dock, you can secure it to the dock, and no matter what is going on in the lake, it's secured – as long as it's not a tsunami or a hurricane. The same word for trust in Arabic is associated with peace and security, too. All of the opposites, the sweet, the bitter, the good, the bad, the happy, the sad are recognized within us as certain causes that interact with us, and circumstances that bring about certain events.

Just because Ramadan is coming doesn't mean that everything is going to be sweet and easy. Nor does it mean everything will be bitter and hard. Certainly events can be desirable in one moment, and undesirable in another moment. When we recognize how this process works, and how we operate within our own self, we can develop many insights into situations that most people don't have. With the children, when they are in a good mood, everything goes fine. In the same playing an hour later, they might be irritable, maybe because they are tired and need a nap. Same circumstances; something else might have intervened. We try to find out the cause, and put the focus on the cause. We don't know whether it's an annoyance or playing together, or something happened. Maybe they got a stomach ache, or maybe they have to go to the bathrooms. Who knows. You don't know.

Our faith is ultimately related somehow to what appears to be cause and effect, but this relationship between cause and effect is really a sense of unity between two poles. Where we want to be is at that point of *mizan*, harmony and balance. We are always striving toward the place of *mizan*. We want to be of the *ummata wasit*, the people of the middle. It means more than just people who are in-between. It means to be secure in the center. When you are centered, there is a circumference. How do you know boundaries unless you know the center point? If life is like a circle, you have to know the center point, and then you know where the boundary is. If you keep moving the center point, then the circumference keeps changing. You can be committed to this as your outer boundary, then something convinces you to move the center, and now this becomes your outer boundary, and you have no center.

We say in English, when you lose your center, you lose yourself. It means they are floating, they don't know where they are. These opposite give us a center point, by definition. The relationship between this cause and effect is a way of defining unity between the two. There is a story about Zayn al Abidin. He said,

I went out and found a wall and leaned against it. There was a man wearing two white garments, looking at my face. He said to me, "Ibn Ali al Hussein, what is the matter that I see you sad and depressed? Do you have some grief over this world, and the provisions of Allah are ready for good and for evil?" I replied, "This is not about this that I am sad. But it is as you say; it is a sadness about the Hereafter. It is a promise delivered by a compelling King, Allah Swt Himself. It is as you say." He said, "So what is it your sadness is from?" I said, "Fearful of a plot of Ibn Zubaya, another man." The man laughed, "O Ibn Ali al Hussein! Have you seen a man who is fearful of Allah, and Allah has not saved him?" I said, "No." He said, "Have you known a man who asked Allah (glory be to Him), and has not been given what he asked for?" I said, "No." I looked, and there was no man in front of me anymore.

But sometimes in the moment, we think we didn't get what we asked for, or that we will never get it. As Imam al Ghazali said, "*When you have something, you are afraid you are going to lose it. When you lose it, you are afraid you won't get it back.*" But it is to be in the moment, trusting that Allah Swt is giving us what we need, and to be grateful for it, and not to lose our center. We see a good example of how, even someone who was a great *imam*, Zayn al Abudin, can get involved with every day issues of this world, becoming fearful of someone plotting, and forgetting where his protection came from, and where his own greatness came from, forgetting about the *ghaib* that came to him whenever he asked for it. You can read his beautiful *du'ā* and *salawat*. From the unseen world, this man appeared and reminded him. He became happy and tranquil. He found the place where his *nafs* had fallen back to a little of the *nafs ammāra*, a little of the *nafs lawwama*, but then he found his place again in the *nafs al mulhama*, and *nafs al mut'mainna*.

This *imam*, who is at the highest state in his own occupation, you'd think would not have any doubt. But his sadness was due to his concern for another person's capacity to do evil and harm. He was afraid about the problems such a man might bring on his fellow human beings. He was worried about the ignorance that would lead a person into darkness. So the voice of truth came to him and reminded him that as long as we are aware of the danger, and as long as we have the *taqwa*, we are safe. As long as we ask Allah Swt for guidance, Allah will give us the guidance. But you have to have the courage, and understand that the guidance is not necessarily going to come from an unseen person, from the *ghaib*. It may come from your father, your mother, your brother, your sister, your aunt, your uncle, your *shaykh*, your guide in this world, those who represent that truth, who do not just care about you and love you, but love you *fī sabīli-LLāh*.

Fī sabīli-LLāh doesn't mean just for the sake of some god sitting on a throne somewhere like a human being. But it means for the sake of compassion, you will get a compassionate answer. For the sake of mercy, the person will help you to find the mercy in that situation. For the sake of love, the love will be there, and the patience will be there. How is that achieved, just philosophically or accidentally? No, it is through prayer and *muraqabah* and *dhikru-LLāh*, and taking the time. Once that voice is heard in the heart, it has served its purpose. Just like that man's voice was heard in the heart of Zain al Abidin, and his worry disappeared. But for that worry, he wouldn't have heard the voice. If it wasn't for that moment of questioning and concern, that being from the *ghaib* would not have appeared to him. He could have gone on in a kind of neutral state, but because of all of his practices and love for Allah Swt, in the moment that we all have once a day, once a month, once a year, once a lifetime, Allah provided, because of who he was. Not everyone who has worries has this being appear to them.

It was also related that Imam Jafar as-Sadiq, the grandson of the Prophet (sal), reported:

The Prophet (sal) laughed until his teeth showed. He said, “Do you not wish to know what causes me to laugh?” They said, “Yes, O Prophet, tell us!” He said, “I am surprised with the Muslims, for there can be no decree that Allah makes upon them except the good end of their affairs; yet the people don’t believe that!”

That was said 1422 years ago, and it is still the same situation. Again, it was related by the same person that Allah revealed to the Prophet Musa:

I did not create any creation more loved by Me than My believing bondsmen, and I only afflict him with that which is good for him; and I restore to him that which is good for him, and I am more knowledgeable and make right his affairs. So let him be patient upon My afflictions, and let him be grateful with what I bestow upon him. Let him be content with My decree. I will then write him among those who are my confirmers, those who are near to Me, if he acts according to what makes Me content, and if he obeys My commands.

That’s very good guidance for us. And we should remember that guidance, and patience - *sabr, sabr*. We are coming to the month of patience, the month of fasting and submission. All of our destinies exist because the way events in our lives unfold and how we interact with them. The true Muslim/a sees perfection and truth behind their destiny, sees perfection and truth behind what they are witnessing and living. Each one of us has expectations, appointments and disappointments. Each one of us has preferences. If we believe that Allah Swt is perfect and His way is perfect, and we base our belief on our past experiences, and the experiences of others that we know and love, that we respect, we will know that even if the first impact of a situation is disagreeable or bitter or painful, in the end we will benefit from it. It may change. Our relationships with people may

change. Ideas may change. The expectations may change. But the benefit may be there. If the mercy of Allah Swt is seen as an affliction, the remedy lies in being patient.

If a person brings themselves to a state of real contentment, the likelihood of that person seeing the real benefit of that situation will even be greater. It was related:

Musa said, "O my Lord! I am content with your destiny. You cause the old ones to die, the young ones to continue to live, inshā'a-Llāh." And Allah said to Musa, "O Musa, are you not content that I am the one who gives provisions?" And Musa said, "Yes, You are the best of all providers and guardians."

We have to learn that contentment with what we have been given. We have been given the month of Ramadan that is coming to us, and the rest of this month of Sha'bān. We have been given the opportunity to increase the depths of our *iman*, and the opportunity to find safety and security in the difficulties, and the balance between this world and the Hereafter. We see that the Prophet Musa (sal) saw the perfect relationship between cause and effect, the seen and the unseen, and declared his total dependency on Allah. Let's try to remember that in the circumstances we live in, every day of our lives, especially in the coming month, we should try to be the most kind, gentle, peaceful, sincere, trustworthy human beings.

Even when difficulties come, we need to be patient, though not patient with evil or wrongdoing. Allah tells us that if we can't change it with our hands, we should change it with our lips. If we can't change it with our lips, we should change it with our intentions. We have to be patient in our hearts and our souls, and know that there is a lesson to be gained, much *thawab* to gain. There are opportunities to be good examples, to be patient with our own selves, and to know our own selves. Keep ourselves centered. *Asalaamu aleikum.*