

# Energies of Ramadan

by David (Daud) Sander, Ph.D.

*Bismillah er Rahman er Rahim*, In the Name of Allah, The One Who Acts with Mercy, The Source of Mercy]. All praise belongs to Allah. Allah owns everything. All power belongs to Allah and not to us. May Allah's peace and blessings be on the Prophet Muhammad and his family and on all the other prophets and their families.

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. It is one of the months ordained as sacred in which the ancient Arabs were supposed to give up fighting. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) used to spend much or all of the month in seclusion alone in the Cave of Hira in the mountains above Mecca, praying and fasting. One Ramadan night, the Angel Gabriel (a.s) first came to him with verses of the Qur'an. And some lore has it that the revelation of other holy books including the Torah, the Psalms and the Gospel also descended during this month. So it is known as the **month of revelations**.

*The month of Ramadan is the month when the Qur'an was revealed as a guidance for mankind and with clear proofs of the guidance and the Furqan [Criterion of Right and Wrong], (2:185, Shaykh Taner's translation)*

It is also known as the **month of mercy**. A hadith states that when the month starts, "the gates of Paradise are opened, the gates of Hell are closed, the Shayatin (devils) are in chains." (cited in Al-Bukhari)

Ramadan contains a big concentration of time, because in it is *Laylatul-Qadr*, the Night of Power, which the Qur'an describes as "better than a thousand months" (97:3). A thousand months works out to about 80 years; an entire human lifetime. As the above story of the Prophet (peace be upon him) suggests, the month is a container for that one night and a preparation for that experience. *Why* this month for 1. revelation, 2. fasting, 3. mercy? What does fasting have to do with revelation and mercy? Contemplating how these threads relate to each other hints at how big a cleansing Ramadan is for humanity.

## **Important Ramadan dates for contemplation and remembrance<sup>i</sup>:**

- our pir Hz. Imam 'Ali was born on the twenty-second day of the month (598 C.E.)
- the 'urs of Es-Sharifa Khadija on the tenth day of the month (619 C.E.)
- the Battle of Badr (623 C.E.)
- our pir Hz. Imam Husayn was born on the sixth day of the month in (624 C.E.)
- our Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) returned to the Ka'ba, purified it and rededicated it to Allah on the nineteenth day of the month (630 C.E.)
- the 'urs of our pir Hz. Imam 'Ali on the twenty-first day of the month (661 C.E.)

## **Humans Eating Food: Gift vs. Competition**

Ramadan calls to mind the whole vast subject of humans eating food. The world's problems are wrapped up in the history of competitive and compulsive eating. Ramadan represents a reversal of that history in the body, soul and society. To contemplate this further, let me start with two points.

1.) Food is a basic transformation point where matter becomes energy and energy becomes matter. As we know, energy becomes matter when plants eat sunlight, and are then eaten by

animals. In turn, matter becomes energy when we digest plant and animal matter, producing energy in the body. This allows us to move and think and speak, but there are other forms of energy as well. This is not as obvious as it seems, because most of history involves the forgetting of the **subtle forms** of energy released not only physically by food, but spiritually. How we relate to these subtle forms is key to how we relate to Allah and to each other.

2.) My other working assumption is that the earliest human ancestors were hunter--- gatherers, who had deep and intimate knowledge of the landscape, the earth's seasons, the solar system, and various species of plants and animals, and their life cycles, and more. By necessity, they ate in harmony with those cycles, and the proof is simply that they survived. The only practical way to live was to be responsive to nature. Nature was Allah providing food in a myriad of ways through an intricate system of interdependent lives. Food could only be seen as a divine gift by the creator. The gift, rather than competition, was the first basis of human society. People lived in tribal communities whose food distribution was based upon sharing and a gift economy as the only practical lifestyle.

Think about it: when there was no money, domesticated animals or mining for mineral treasures, and people didn't think of owning water or parcels of land, there was no way to accumulate material wealth. The most noble person was not the one who possessed the most of anything, but the one who could give away the most food to others. Transferring food matter in gift giving created energy in the complex form of emotional connections.

And this giving increased the wealth of the person by the only standard they had for wealth: ties of affection. The act of giving food created intangible form of energy (we could call it blessing, or *baraka*). The more bonds of friendship, the more love relationships, the richer and more powerful you are.<sup>ii</sup> Is this what paradise looks like? Or is it just a romantic view of pre---historic times? Think about it and see what your heart says.

Hunter-gatherers ate different foods during the different seasons, travelled to different food sources at different times of the year, and accepted that occasionally going hungry was part of the whole deal. For example, northern Native American tribes expected times of hunger in the late winter as part of their yearly cycle. European colonists, on the other hand, were accustomed to never allowing oneself to go hungry, and could not understand why the native people did not earnestly stockpile food in preparation for their lean times. But the natives had a tradition of trust that food would come, and also considered extended days of hunger to be a means of purification and sacred visions. "We spend seven and eight days, even ten sometimes, without eating anything, yet we do not die."<sup>iii</sup> I take this as evidence that fasting is a design element in the original human make---up of *fitrah*. What we call "civilization" often goes against this design.

Agriculture and civilization grew out of the attempt to domesticate plants and animals in order to regulate and somewhat control the supply of food coming from the earth. This also meant the domestication of humans, the rule of some humans by others to make the system work (thus the creation of social classes). It became a human addiction to expect control of the food supply, and to surrender to whatever system made that possible. This is suggested by the story of the Israelites wandering in the desert after they were rescued from Egypt.

When they became free of the Egyptians and were wandering in the desert, they missed the agricultural regularity and control of food. They grumbled that they would like to return to Egypt, even though it meant they would be enslaved in order to get this. Allah was sending them manna (a kind of food that appeared on the ground every morning, but could not be stored up) and quails. (See Qur'an 7:160, and 2:61, as well as Exodus, Chapter 16.)

One purpose of prophetic messages is to provide correction for the excesses made possible by “civilization”, so civilization and all its positives could be sustainable. Consumer culture and its eating patterns are a signal of this meaning. Our sense of entitlement and denial as consumers is wrapped up in the history of competitive and compulsive eating. Control a parcel of land and the human capital to work it, and you get to say when and what you will eat. The urgency of that control has brought us into a global mindset. When you desire something you can make it happen. Fuel from sugar is linked to the history of forced labor. Ramadan is a reversal of that history in the body, mind and soul. So in sum, fasting is about the rediscovery of a gift economy, rather than a consumption---based and competitive economy. It contains healing medicine in a big way for the world. This is reflected in the internal physical dynamics of fasting.

### **Burning Sugar vs. Burning Fat**

Recent science has shown that the human body is not designed to live as if in a permanent feast. Hunger is a component of our health. Allah mentions those who “enjoy themselves and eat as cattle eat”—(Qur’an 47:12). Cows and sheep spend 6--7 hours a day eating, and hours more chewing their cud. They are grazers, which humans were not created to be. When we humans eat automatically, without periods of hunger, we are contradicting our body’s natural function. Blind consumption of resources, especially in our modern, artificially controlled food system has made our bodies dependent upon fuel, particularly glucose (sugar) for its primary energy source. (Large, unceasing sugar intake promotes insulin resistance which is associated with diabetes and cancer.)

When we eat unrestrictedly, our bodies shift into high gear and stay in “go go” mode, signaled by the unceasing intake of food. This spurs high levels of a growth hormone called IGF1, which causes our bodies cells to constantly put their energy into dividing to reproduce more cells. That is, they produce unnecessarily more of you. Which to me is a good definition of the lower levels of nafs—there is more of us than necessary. Fasting causes levels of this hormone to drop, and the cells to shift into a different mode, in which they slow down reproduction and focus on repair. With lower IGF1 levels, the body can restore itself and repair its DNA more easily making it less vulnerable to diseases like cancer and diabetes. When we eat automatically spurred on by our culture and psychology of consumption, the result for the body is the equivalent of constantly driving and refueling a car, without taking it to the mechanic. Reduction in IGF1 levels does *not* seem to come from just eating less, however, and this is the kicker. Fasting is the quickest way to reduce these levels.<sup>iv</sup>

When we fast intermittently on a regular basis, our body is able to make the transfer from deriving its energy from externally supplied fuel (sugar) to deriving it from fat (the unnecessary aspects of ourselves). This shift doesn’t come from dieting alone. It takes a certain amount of regular fasting for your body to make the change. When it does, several things happen. Your habitual sense of hunger decreases. This is due to the normalization of the “hunger hormone”, which means a “reality check” for how much food you actually need. Burning fat rather than sugar slows the aging process. It releases ketones, which are the preferred fuel for the brain, as opposed to glucose. This plus other factors make fasting a positive ally against diseases like Alzheimers and Parkinsons.

Islam makes fasting obligatory (for those physically able) in the month Ramadan, and highly recommended intermittently (e.g., Mondays and Thursdays, or in our Tariqa, the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> of every lunar month) throughout the year. Allowing us, with Allah’s help, to make these

shifts an established healthy lifestyle.

So we see that grazing like cattle is not having mercy on the body. It is driving all the cells of your body like slaves. Which is another reason why Ramadan is the month of mercy.

### **Fasting and Mercy**

Fasting with others, and feeding each other, is an essential ingredient of Ramadan. When going hungry together and sharing food, the matter within food is transferred into positive spiritual energy. We can observe and understand better the power of this energy. So Ramadan is not just physically fasting, but attending to subtle kinds of energy.

*A lover's food is the love of bread, not the bread.* — Jalaluddin Rumi<sup>v</sup>

The unseen bonds that come from giving are the main factor, not the transfer of the physical form of the gift. If eating, sharing your food and fasting create more love, it is feeding you spiritually, otherwise it may be draining you.

*There are many people who fast, but they only attain hunger and thirst and nothing else.*  
—Hadith<sup>vi</sup>

Why? Maybe one reason is they are fasting with their stomachs only, not their tongues, hands, brains, deeds, attitudes. Or maybe in many cases fasting is done mechanically, to be a hero in sacrificing your obedience to God's command. We often too easily associate divine mercy with acts of obedience, as if by going hungry, we are making a noble sacrifice to make us holy and thus earn mercy. The latin roots of the word "sacrifice" means to "make holy". But sacrifice is a very heavy and tricky subject in religion. Of course, it's a familiar religious idea that you "have to give something to get something." But both the Torah (Hosea 6:6) and the Gospel (Matthew 9:16) teach that Allah says, "I desire Mercy and not sacrifice". And in the Qur'an, "My Mercy encompasses all things" (7:156, Shaykh Taner's translation). I take this to mean that mercy and sacrifice are two different things, (and Allah is not interested in pay-offs from humanity). Ramadan can help bring us beyond all that self-deception.

Fasting with the whole being brings awareness of others who are hungry, and of the beings that gave themselves up to become our food (and us), and how they interpenetrate the illusion of our separate existence. Sympathy and pity for the poor: That is, Mercy. It means little as just a concept until put into a physical practice, when you can experience the reality of the other and contribute to their well-being.

Finally, this brings up the role of fana (ego-annihilation), entry into nonexistence, the night side of our total being. Ramadan brings us into touch with the fact that dark matter and energy make up most of the universe. As well, hunger and suffering exist a lot more in this world than we care to remember. It reminds me of the Taoist saying that the hollow space is what makes something useful or powerful (such as in the vessel, the hub of the wheel). It also recalls where, in Rumi's verse, the hollowed-out, empty reed alone can make music. When one is empty in this way, one is fasting from all negative thoughts and actions, and ultimately, from any object of love other than Allah, as our pir Abdul Qadir Geylani has taught us.<sup>vii</sup>

Hence, the *hadith qudsi*, "Fasting is for Me"<sup>viii</sup>. Because it is the practice of the essence, which

appears to us as void or emptiness because the qualities do not appear present. As Shaykh has taught us, by giving up food and drink and sex in fasting, we get closer to Allah, who partakes in none of these things.

Ramadan instills *faqr* (poverty) as essential to our connection. Fasting is instituting *faqr* in the body and from the body, teaching it to the personality, the attitude, mind, brain, society.

There is also the joy factor. Joy is another kind of energy generated by fasting, along with mercy, love and empathy. “The one who fasts has two joys: one when he breaks his fast, and the other when he meets his Lord.” -Hadith (Al-Bukhari) Or perhaps we could also say in the tariqa language, that these two joys are really one: when you take joy in food, you are experiencing your Lord. Our Shaykh has told us that if you love your food, you are loving Allah. The love is tastier than the food. Or in Rumi’s terms, enjoying the halva is the start of appreciating the halva-maker.

So I think a Ramadan discourse should not end without spreading some joy through recipes.<sup>ix</sup>

### **Eggs with Caramelized Onions**

|                                 |   |                          |
|---------------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| 2 large purple or red onions    | 4 | ¼ teaspoon cinnamon      |
| tablespoons butter              |   | ½ teaspoon sugar         |
| ½ teaspoon salt                 |   | ¼ teaspoon black pepper  |
| ½ teaspoon mild tasting vinegar |   | 4 eggs                   |
| 1/8 teaspoon allspice           |   | salt and pepper to taste |

Cut the onions into quarters and then slice them very thin. Place butter in a heavy-bottomed skillet and melt. Add onions and salt and cook over very low heat for 40 to 50 minutes, stirring the onions every 4-6 minutes. As the onions dry out sprinkle them with water. Near end of cooking time add vinegar, spices, pepper and sugar. Cook until the onions are crispy and reddish brown in color. Make 4 divots in the mound of onions and break an egg into each divot. Sprinkle the egg with salt and pepper. Cook until a film forms over the egg yolk, but the yolk is not fully solid. Divide into 4 portions and serve.

### **Harira (Lamb and Chickpea Soup)**

|                                    |   |  |
|------------------------------------|---|--|
| 1 pound lamb cut into small pieces | 1 | ½ cup chopped parsley                              |
| teaspoon cinnamon                  |   | 2 (14 oz.) cans chopped tomatoes                   |
| 1 teaspoon turmeric                |   | (separate juice from tomato pieces)                |
| 1 teaspoon ground pepper           | 1 | cup red lentils                                    |
| teaspoon ginger                    |   | 8 cups water                                       |
| 2 tablespoons butter               | 1 | 1 cup chickpeas                                    |
| tablespoon olive oil               | 1 | ½ cup vermicelli noodles, broken into small pieces |
| cup chopped celery                 |   | 2 eggs, beaten together with the juice of ½ lemon  |
| 2 cups chopped onions              |   | salt   |

Place lamb, butter, olive oil, celery, onions, parsley, ginger and spices in a large pot. Cook over medium heat for 5 minutes. Add tomatoes and cook 5-10 minutes more. Salt to taste. Add tomato juice, 7 cups water, and lentils. Bring the pot to a boil. Then reduce heat to simmer for 2 hours.

Add noodles and chickpeas, and cook an additional 5-10 minutes. Keeping soup at a simmer, add egg and lemon mixture, stirring all the while so that it blends with and thickens the soup base. Once blended and cooked for a few more minutes, ladle into bowls and garnish with extra parsley and lemon wedges.

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<sup>i</sup>Note: C.E. refers to “Common Era”, and corresponds with A.D. Source for these dates: Tanya Gurevich, *Understanding Islam and Muslim Traditions, An Introduction to the Religious Practices, Celebrations, Festivals, Observances, Beliefs, Folklore, Customs, and Calendar System of the World’s Muslim Communities, Including an Overview of Islamic History and Geography*. Detroit, MI: Omnigraphics, 2004. p. 299.

<sup>ii</sup> A good source on this topic is the first four chapters of Lewis Hyde’s *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*, (NY: Vintage Books, 2007),

<sup>iii</sup> See William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists and the Ecology of New England*, NY: Hill & Wang, 2003, 41.

<sup>iv</sup> See this article which has an excellent video attached:

<http://articles.mercola.com/sites/articles/archive/2014/06/14/intermittent-fasting-longevity.aspx>

<sup>v</sup> Jalaluddin Rumi, *The Essential Rumi: Translations by Coleman Barks*, (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1995), 29.

<sup>vi</sup> Cited in Abdul Qadir Geylani and Ahmed er Rifai, *Grand Masters of Sufism*, translated by Es-Seyyid Es-Shaykh Taner Ansari, (Nassau, NY: Ansari Publications, 2008), 86.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>ix</sup> These recipes are from the Gurevich book, *op. cit.*, pages 335 and 323.

### Call of the Divine

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